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EVERETT [illegible]

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
31 WEST TWENTY-THIRD STREET

WITH KIT CARSON IN THE ROCKIES

A TALE OF THE BEAVER COUNTRY

BY

EVERETT McNEIL

AUTHOR OF "IN TEXAS WITH DAVY CROCKETT," "THE HERMIT OF THE CULEBRA MOUNTAINS," "THE LOST TREASURE CAVE," "THE BOY FORTY-NINERS," ETC.

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
31 WEST TWENTY-THIRD STREET

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CALIFORNIA

TO ALL YOUTHS

WHO LOVE TO READ OF DARING DEEDS
DONE BRAVELY BY ADVENTUROUS MEN
THIS STORY OF THE AMERICAN TRAPPER
IS AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED

M189753

FOREWORD

The United States owes much to the trappers, to the men who shouldered their long-barreled rifles, mounted their tough little horses, slung traps and packs on the backs of horses and mules, and went forth fearlessly into the wilds of the then unexplored wildernesses of the Great West, lured thither by the gold on the backs of the beavers and the other fur-bearing animals and by the call of the wild to their own adventurous spirits. They were not only the real finders of the way *to* the West, but, also, of the ways *through* the West to the Pacific Ocean. Long before the days of the explorers, like Pike and Long and Fremont, even before that adventurous wilderness journey of Lewis and Clark, the trails of the trappers had crossed and recrossed the Rocky Mountains and the cracks of their rifles had been heard in their most hidden fastnesses.

The scientifically educated and literary explorers came and saw and recorded; and then they told the wonderful story of what they had seen of the West to the world, and the world has given to them all the honors. The trappers could not do this. They had no scientific or literary attainments, and could not tell the world what they had seen and done, and the world has almost forgotten the great part they

played in the winning of the West from savagery to civilization.

In the story, WITH KIT CARSON IN THE ROCKIES, an attempt has been made not only to picture vividly and truthfully the picturesque and adventurous life of the trapper, but, also, to indicate his proper place in the history of the West; and it is hoped that the tale will leave the boy reader with a better understanding of how the shackles of the savagery of the wilderness were struck off the limbs of the mighty young giant of the West, and with a truer appreciation of the men of the rifle and the trap who were the first to strike a blow at those shackles.

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With Kit Carson in the Rockies

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE CARAVAN

"*LOS Americanos!*" "*Los carros!*" "*La entrada de la caravana!*"

With this cry, first uttered shrilly and excitedly by a single distant voice and almost instantly echoed and re-echoed by a hundred joyously excited men, women and children, the quaint little old-world town of Santa Fé awoke suddenly and noisily from its afternoon siesta and hurried forth to welcome the long line of dust-covered, weather-stained wagons, toiling mules and oxen, and tall gaunt sunburnt men, that now might be seen slowly descending the hills to the eastward of the town. There were ninety-eight huge canvas-topped wagons in this caravan; and no wonder the sight of their coming woke the drowsy old town into sudden and joyous life—for, what bright colored calicoes and cottons and rich velvets and silks and laces and sparkling jewels and costly wearing apparel and rich housings and wondrous toys and trinkets might

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not these great wagons hold for the dark-eyed senoritas, the display-loving dons, and the eager children! Not for a long twelvemonth had so large a caravan as this entered Santa Fé; and, when at last, with a great cracking of whips, shoutings of men and creaking of wheels the heavy wagons rolled through the streets of the town and halted in the *plaza publica,* it seemed as if all the men, women and children in Santa Fé were there to give them joyous welcome, crowding curiously around those heavily-laden wagons and watching almost in awe those tall rugged *Americanos,* as they quickly unyoked oxen and unhitched mules and prepared to go into camp —their long journey ended.

And the *Americanos?* Never was sight of safe harbor to storm-tossed sailors more welcomed than were the gleaming towers and flat roofs and white-washed walls of Santa Fé to the eyes of these stalwart travelers of the lonesome plains. For weary weeks had that long line of wagons crawled its slow way, like some huge white snake, from Independence on the Missouri River, across hundreds of miles of dreary plains and deserts, through bridgeless rivers and up and down rocky hills, ever beset by bands of Indians thirsting for their treasures and their blood and wanting only the opportunity to take both; and all, from the Captain of the Caravan down to the meanest wagoner, were boisterous with gladness, when the last wagon came to a halt in the public plaza of Santa Fé and the long days

of weary traveling and nights of anxious watching were ended.

"I swun, I never thought I'd be as glad to see th' face of a Mexie as I be right now," declared one of the tall wagoners, as his eyes glanced around the crowding circle of Mexicans. "An' them houses, even if they be sawed off at th' top with walls of mud jest whitewashed, look good—jest like a picter from our old bible," and his eyes rested wonderingly on the quaint old flat-roofed adobe structures that surrounded the plaza. "But, 'tain't no time for meditatin' an' lookin'. I'm too powerful anxious to get out of sight of these here wagons for a spell an' inside of one of them adobe structures an' outside of some of th' Mexies' cookin' to do any loiterin'. Come, yunks, get some quick jumps into them long legs of yourn, or we'll be th' last to get out of here," and he turned to two boys, who stood close together near the wagon, their eyes drinking in the animated scene around them.

There were six yokes of huge oxen hitched to the great wagon, and these had to be unyoked and hobbled before Hammer Jones, as the big wagoner was called, would be at liberty to "get outside of some of th' Mexies' cookin'," as he put it, a feat that, as has been already indicated, he was exceedingly anxious to accomplish.

The two "yunks"—they were both nearly men in size—at the words of the wagoner, jumped to the heads of the oxen and began unyoking the tired

beasts with swift practiced hands. They were even more anxious than was Hammer Jones himself to get the work done, so that they would be free, not to "get outside of some of th' Mexies' cookin'," but to learn if the man they had come so far to find was in Santa Fé.

In ten minutes, so swiftly did the man and the two boys work, the oxen were unyoked and hobbled and driven to where the animals were being corralled under guard of the herders; and our friends were free.

"Now," and Hammer Jones—Ham, his friends called him and hereafter we will assume the privilege of a friend and call him Ham—looked with kindly interest into the faces of the two boys who had been his helpers and mess-companions for so many days, "here we be at last in Santa Fé; an' seein' that you are some young an' un'customed to th' ways of th' Mexies, an' that you've been mighty willin' help all 'long from Independence, I reckon 'twon't be more'n friendly if I asks you to sample some of th' Mexies' cookin' 'long with me, an' then give you a swing round th' town, jest to get you some 'customed to th' Mexies' ways an' smells, afore you goes wanderin' round by yourselves."

"We are much obliged to you, Ham," answered the younger of the two boys; "but Rex and I are not hungry," and he glanced at his companion, who nodded, "and we are mighty anxious to get to the trading-post of Captain Young and give him our

message. Father said we must go to him just as soon as we reached Santa Fé. But," he added quickly, as he noticed the look of disappointment on the countenance of his big friend, "we will both be very glad to have you go with us to Captain Young's. We are not used to such—such—" and the boy hesitated and glanced uneasily around at the gesticulating, excited, dark-skinned men and women and bright-eyed children thronging about the wagons.

"Sech a mongrel-lookin' lot of humans," broke in Ham laughing. "You see Ingines an' Mexies mix as easy as flour an' water, 'till th' Lord only knows which from 'tother. I'm powerful sorry you're not carin' to eat right now; but, I reckon you're right 'bout goin' to Young's first. Sartain, I'll go with you, bein' that I want to see Captain Young myself; an' I reckon, 'twon't be none difficult to find th' place, seein' there's his sign manual over yonder," and he pointed over the heads of the motley crowd across the plaza to a large sign, hanging in front of a huge one-story adobe building. "Now, we'll jest let Captain Tom know where we're goin'," and, accompanied by the two boys, he hurried to where the Captain of the Caravan sat on his horse superintending the camping of the large caravan.

Captain Tom Roberts was a tall, lean, huge-boned man, "just skin and muscles and bones and grit," his friends said, who had spent three-quarters of the fifty years of his life on the great plains and in the

mountains west of the Missouri, hunting, trapping and Indian fighting. Like the majority of men of his type he was not much given to talking. The silence of the great plains and the stillness and the grandeur of the mighty mountains had impressed themselves deeply on his character. He had learned that the great things of God are never noisy. But, when he did speak, his words went straight to the mark, like well-aimed rifle bullets. He paused long enough to listen to Hammer Jones, gave him a quick affirmative, and then, with a nod and a smile to the two boys, galloped swiftly off to where one of the wagoners was having trouble with his mules.

"Now keep close ahind me and we'll go through these Mexies like a gang-plow through a medder," and Hammer Jones squared his broad shoulders and started straight for the trading-post, regardless of the crowd of Mexicans who stood in his way.

The Mexicans, smiling, laughing, gesticulating and talking, parted promptly before the huge bulk of Hammer Jones, as he, closely followed by the two boys, passed through their midst and came out in front of Young's trading-post.

Around the door of the trading-post lounged a dozen or more men, armed with long-barreled rifles and dressed almost completely in deerskin, with fur caps on their heads, the tail of the coon or of whatever animal the cap was made from usually hanging down behind. They were strong, virile, fearless-looking men, with an air of independence

and freedom in striking contrast to the voluble servility of the average Mexican. The two boys eyed these men with eager interest.

"A company of trappers must have jest come in, or Young's makin' up a party to go out," commented Hammer Jones the moment he saw the men in deerskin. "No, he ain't there," he added, after a moment's swift scrutiny of the faces of the men, in answer to the look of eager inquiry on the countenances the two boys turned to him; "but maybe he's inside. Leastwise I reckon Young will come as near knowin' where he is as any man hereabouts can," and he led the way into the building.

A number of trappers, a half dozen Indians and two or three Mexicans were trading or lounging in the store, while three clerks were busy waiting on them. In the back part of the room, talking with one of the trappers, stood a large man, whose bronzed face spoke of the scorching sun of the plains and the winds and the storms and the cold of the mountains.

The moment this man saw the face of Hammer Jones he excused himself to the trapper, and, hurrying to him, gripped him warmly by the hand.

"Glad to see you, Ham, mighty glad to see you!" he cried, shaking the hand vigorously. "Come in with Captain Tom's caravan, didn't you? And the boys?" and he turned an inquiring face to the two lads.

"Come 'long with us," replied Ham. "They're

from New O'leans, on a special mission, an' have a message for you—Captain Young, my two friends, Rex Holt and Dill Conroyal," and he nodded first to the elder of the two boys and then to the other. "Two as plucky lads as ever came out of a city, an' th' best bull-whackers for their age this side of th' Big Muddy. Now, here's your Captain Young, lads," and the eyes Ham turned to the two boys were glowing with friendliness.

"I'm powerful glad to know you," and Captain Young gripped the hand of each boy and shook it warmly. "From New Orleans, and bearing a message for me?" and the keen eyes looked inquiringly into the faces of the two lads.

"Yes," Dill answered, thrusting one hand into the bosom of his buckskin jacket and bringing out a sealed packet wrapped in oiled paper, "I have a letter to you from father. He said you would remember him. He once trapped and hunted with you. Noel H. Conroyal is his name, but you used to call him Con. Here's the letter," and he offered the sealed packet to Captain Young.

"Remember Con! Con—Conroyal! Great Buffalos, I should say I did! And this is his boy, Con's boy! I must have another shake!" and he again caught hold of Dill's hand and shook it until the lad thought he would loosen his arm from his shoulder. "Why, I've hunted and trapped and fought Indians with your dad from the Missouri to the Sacramento Valley, and I'd never ask for a

better comrade. Did he ever tell you about the big fight we had with the grizzly on the Yellowstone?—No— Just like Con. But, see here!" and the big fellow threw open the bosom of his woolen shirt until he exposed his great hairy chest and right shoulder. "That's where the grizzly had me when Con rushed in and knifed the brute," and he pointed to a great scar that nearly covered his right shoulder and chest. "Them's his claw and teeth marks; and if it hadn't been for Con—" His pause was expressive—"But Con was there! And he killed the brute, killed him with his knife. The only man I ever knowed to kill a grizzly with a knife. Jumped right on top of his back while the beast was chawing me, and clung there where the brute could not get at him, until he had jabbed his knife clean through his heart. Oh, but that was a great fight!" and his eyes sparkled. "And your dad never told you a word about it! Just like Con! I'd give a mighty lot to have his good right hand in mine right now— The letter," he ended abruptly, as if he were just a bit ashamed of the display he had been making of his feelings; and, taking the sealed packet from Dill's hand, he opened it and read the enclosed letter slowly. For a moment after having finished reading the letter, Captain Young stood silent, his eyes studying the faces of the two boys, while his own countenance grew sober and thoughtful; then, excusing himself to Ham, he turned to Rex and Dill.

"Come with me to my office, boys," he said. "I want to talk over this letter with you alone," and he led the way to a door in the back part of the store, which opened into his private office.

CHAPTER II

IN CAPTAIN YOUNG'S PRIVATE OFFICE

THE private office of Captain Young was a large room, considerably longer than it was wide, with one end completely filled, from floor to ceiling, with tightly packed bales of the valuable fur of the beaver and the skins of other animals taken in trade. The remainder of the room was the office, where a rude attempt had been made to secure comfort and adornment by covering the floor with the skins of bears and buffalos and hanging on the walls trophies of the wild life Captain Young had lived on the plains and in the mountains. In one corner of the room hung the complete dress and equipment of a once famous Indian chief, slain by the hand of Captain Young himself in one of his numerous encounters with the Blackfeet warriors, while brightly-decorated blankets, bows and arrows, spears, head-dresses of chiefs, deer horns, beaded moccasins, rifles, etc., hanging in a picturesque confusion very pleasing to the eye, nearly hid the rough walls. Three or four rudely fashioned chairs, a large table, a huge iron-bound chest, and a small writing desk completed the furnishings of the room.

"Be seated, boys," Captain Young said, when the

three were in this room, as he closed the door and sat down in a large chair near the table.

Rex and Dill promptly occupied two of the chairs, and then looked around the curiously-furnished room with eager interest. Directly under Dill's chair, with his feet resting within six inches of the head, which the art of the taxidermist had preserved in all its savage ferocity, was the skin of a monster grizzly bear, the long white teeth and red tongue in the wide-opened jaws and the glowing eyes still defying and threatening. The eyes of both lads almost instantly focused themselves on this head, fascinated by its look of ferocious power.

"I do not wonder the head of that grizzly fascinates you," Captain Young said, as both boys almost simultaneously turned inquiring eyes to his face; "for that was the monster that came near killing me—the bear your father killed with his knife," and he nodded to Dill, "the largest grizzly I ever saw— But, now, let us get down to business," and he opened Mr. Conroyal's letter and spread it out on the table in front of him. For a minute or two he studied the letter, then he turned to Rex and Dill.

"Do you boys understand what this letter means to you?" he asked.

"We have not read father's letter," Dill replied; "but, of course, we know why we are here, if that is what you mean."

"No, that is not what I mean," Captain Young

responded. "I supposed that you knew why you were here, but I wondered if you knew what you were expected to do now that you are here."

"Yes," and Dill's face lighted, "we know that. We are to find Kit Carson, and give him father's message, and then we are to go with him to the mission in California, and get the papers Uncle Manuel, mother's brother, left there, and return with them to New Orleans. Father said that if Kit Carson was not here, you would know where he was and how to find him, and would tell us what to do."

"Find Kit Carson—go to the California Mission—get the papers—return home with them! Sounds easy, doesn't it, boys?" and Captain Young laughed. "It took you less than a minute to say that; but I shouldn't be surprised if it took you more than a year to go through that program. Find Kit Carson! Why, the good Lord alone knows where Kit is now, except that he is somewhere in the Rockies; and the Rocky Mountains are a mighty big proposition for two boys to tackle."

"But we must find him," broke in Rex. "It makes no difference where he is, we must find him. We must secure those papers and bring them home with us; and Uncle Noel says Kit Carson is the only man that can do this, so we must find him and give him Uncle Noel's message, no matter if he is in the Rocky Mountains. Uncle Noel said you would help us."

"And so I will, my boy," Captain Young

responded with hearty promptness. "But I reckon Con calculated on your finding Kit here or at Taos. Don't seem possible that he expected you two boys to start out and hunt him up in the Rocky Mountains, knowing what that would mean as well as Con does."

"Yes, father hoped and believed we would find Kit Carson here; but," and Dill's firm lips tightened, "he told us if we did not find him here that we must go where he was, that we must hunt for him until we found him, that if he were in the mountains hunting and trapping we must go there. He said that you would outfit us and get the right kind of men to go with us, for old comrades' sake, and that you were to spare no expense. Father, you know, is wealthy now; and—and we must have those papers, no matter how much it costs, no matter what dangers, what difficulties are in the way; and to get them we need Kit Carson's help. Father said that he had made this all clear to you in his letter; and had made you his legal representative here, with authority to do whatever was necessary and to spend whatever was needed to make our efforts a success. Father would have come himself; but he could not. He—he broke his leg; and Rex and I had to come. There was no one else that he could send, no one that he dared trust on such a mission," and Dill straightened up just a bit proudly in his chair. "And—and we are not as young as we look. Rex is past sixteen and I am nearly fifteen

years old; and we are both used to hunting and camping and roughing it out of doors. You will do what you can to help us, won't you Captain Young?" and the eyes Dill turned to Captain Young were full of appeal.

For a couple of minutes Captain Young sat silent, his eyes studying the faces of the two boys. Doubtless he was picturing all that they would be called upon to brave and endure, should they go into the mountains in search of Kit Carson, and wondering if they had the pluck and the courage needed to make such a venture a success. Evidently his scrutiny of the two faces was satisfactory, for, suddenly, he straightened up in his chair, a look on his face that seemed to say "I see my way clear now," and turning to a large leather bound book on the table began turning over its pages quickly. In a moment he came to the right page, bent over it for an instant, and then, straightening up, turned again to the boys.

"I thought I was right," he said. "The trappers' rendezvous next summer will be at the mouth of Horse Creek on the Green River. Kit Carson, if he is alive, will be sure to be there. That will be the place for you to go to find him. A party of trappers came in a couple of weeks ago and are already anxious to be out in the wilds again. I will send them to the Green River region to trap until it is time to go to the rendezvous, and you boys shall go with them. You see, from about the middle of

June to the middle of September, the beaver and all fur-bearing animals are shedding their hair, which makes their skins worthless, and during this time all trapping is stopped and the different bands of trappers gather at some previously appointed place of rendezvous, where they meet the traders and exchange their pelts for needed supplies and have a general good time together, sometimes lasting for a month or two—a sort of trappers' fair; and Kit will be sure to be there. Let me see, it is now the fifteenth of August. This will give you time to reach the mountains and have a month or more trapping before the winter sets in. Then, when the snow gets too deep for trapping, you can go into winter quarters and be ready for the spring season, trapping along in the direction of Green River until it is time to start for the rendezvous. Seems like a mighty slow way of finding Kit Carson, don't it, boys? But it is the quickest and surest way I know. Of course you might run on to him while trapping in the mountains; but there ain't one chance out of ten thousand of your doing so. Now, I'll get right to work. You boys will stay with me until the trappers are ready to start, which will be next Monday morning at sunup," and Captain Young—he was a man who made quick and positive decisions and then saw that they were at once put into force—almost jumped out of his chair, in his hurry to see the trappers and to get the

expedition under way, and rushed out of the room, calling to the boys to follow him.

Rex and Dill had been greatly disappointed when they found that Kit Carson was not in Santa Fé; and now, when they learned that he was thousands of miles away, hidden somewhere in one of the innumerable recesses of the Rocky Mountains, and that they would have to wait nearly a year for even a chance to see him, this disappointment became so keen as to be almost unbearable.

"I—I did not suppose it would take so long to find Kit Carson," Rex complained, as he and Dill hurried after Captain Young. "I thought, even if he was out trapping, that Captain Young would know in what part of the country he was, so that we could go at once to that place and find him. I don't see how we can wait for nearly a year before doing anything to get those papers. They might be taken away from the Mission before then, to some place where we could not find them, even to Mexico—and we must get them, we must get them," he repeated, as a look of dogged determination came into his young face. "I do not think Captain Young understands how great is our need to hurry. I am going to tell him how necessary it is for us to find Kit Carson before winter, and see if he cannot think of some way of doing it—There, he has stopped to talk with one of the trappers! Now is the time for me to tell him," and Rex, who with Dill close by his side

had been trying to overtake the hurrying Captain, hastened to where he had stopped to speak to the trapper with whom he had been talking when the boys entered the store.

"Captain Young," began Rex, "we can't wait nearly a year to find Kit Carson. We must try to find him before winter. You don't know how much depends on our finding him. Can't you learn in what part of the country he is trapping, so that we can go directly there? We—"

"My boy," and Captain Young laid a quick hand on Rex's shoulder, "I do understand your great need of haste—I have read your Uncle Noel's letter; but you do not seem to understand the vastness of the country into which Kit Carson has gone, nor the fact that it has now been two years since Kit was here and over a year since I have heard a word from him or of him. I do not know, no one here knows, where he is, except, if he is still alive, that he is somewhere between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean. It would be useless to try to go where he is trapping, because no one knows within a thousand miles where that is. The trapper goes until he finds beaver. It may be a hundred miles, it may be a thousand, it matters not to him, only so that in the end he finds the beaver. But, once a year, all must gather at the rendezvous, to get fresh supplies of powder and lead and the other things their wild life needs, in exchange for their furs; and there you will find Kit Carson. I know

your need of haste, and I wish I knew a quicker way of finding Kit; but I do not. So, as all have to do out here on the frontier, you must make the best of the situation—and I am sure you will," he added quickly, his face lighting up with a smile. "Now I must leave you for a while. I have much to do in order to get you started Monday. Make yourselves right at home here. I'll be back in an hour or so," and, accompanied by the trapper, Captain Young hurried out into the street before either boy had time to utter a word in reply.

"Well," and Rex turned a gloomy face to Dill the moment the door closed behind the trader and his companion, "of course Captain Young is right; and we've just got to make the best of things as they are; and if it wasn't for those papers I wouldn't care, for it will be a great experience, this trip with a lot of trappers into the wilds of the Rocky Mountains where there are wild Indians and bears and deer and other animals to hunt and trap," and his face brightened. "I've always wanted to be a trapper, and live wild in the mountains and on the great plains; and now I am going to have a chance to see what the life is like."

"So have I," Dill admitted, his own face lighting up. "Ever since I can remember I have wanted to be a trapper, like father was, and see the wonderful scenes that he has so often told me about, and live the wild free life of the great plains and mountains; and maybe fight Indians and kill grizzly bears and

buffalo and deer and trap and hunt. I think trapping must be the most exciting and interesting life there is to live on this earth; and then father says it makes a man brave and independent and hardy, because he has to depend entirely on himself to take care of himself and is outdoors all the time where the air is pure and there is plenty of room to breathe. Yes, it will be a great experience! But," and his face sobered, "I wish we could find Kit Carson and get those papers first. Still I don't see how anything can happen to them. We know that Uncle Manuel left them at the mission, in care of one of the brothers, who was to keep them until he, or someone having authority from him, called for them. There is some mystery about those papers that I do not understand, something that father is afraid somebody else will discover; and that is why I suppose he made us promise to tell no one but Kit Carson and Captain Young why we were here. Probably the letter father gave us, which we were not to read until we had secured the papers, will tell us all about this. Anyway we must be very careful to keep our promises, because it would not do for us to miss getting the papers through any fault of our own."

"Yes," agreed Rex, "I suppose the papers will be safe enough, if nothing happens to the brother your uncle left them with. But I do not like this long wait. Something might happen; and then we do not know what misfortune it might bring upon

Uncle Noel. He seemed dreadfully anxious for us to get the papers just as soon as possible. They must be very important to him, or he would not have sent us half-way across a continent, through thousands of miles of wilderness, to get them. Too bad your Uncle Manuel died so suddenly, before he had time to tell you all of his story; but he must have told your father more than we know. I wished I knew what was in that letter he gave us. I wonder why he forbade us to read it until we secured the papers. Have you any idea, Dill?"

"No," Dill answered, "only I think it is something father did not wish us to know at all, unless we got the papers."

"Well," Rex meditated, "it's a curious business anyway; and I wish we did not have to wait so long before solving it. But now, as Captain Young says, the only thing for us to do is to make the most of things as they are, and to get ourselves at once in the best possible shape to go with the trappers. Monday is only three days off, and there is a lot that I want to do before then. Let's go to the wagon and get our things and bring them here. You know Captain Young said that we were to stay with him."

Dill promptly agreed to this, and the two boys at once started for the wagons, which had been gathered in a compact group near the center of the *plaza publica*. The wagons were still surrounded by a curious but good-natured crowd of

Mexicans that promptly made way for the two boys; and they reached their wagon, secured their personal belongings and returned to the store of Captain Young without trouble, though considerably delayed by the interest they had taken in watching the lively and novel street scenes of quaint old Santa Fé, so different from the sights they were accustomed to seeing on the streets of New Orleans.

CHAPTER III

Pom

THEY found Captain Young in his office, in close consultation with Tom Roberts, Captain of the Caravan. The moment the boys entered the room, Captain Young turned a smiling face to them.

"I have good news for you boys," he said. "Captain Tom has agreed to head your party of trappers; and if anyone can find Kit Carson before winter, Captain Tom can. But," he added quickly as he noticed the look of delight that came into the faces of both lads, "don't count overmuch even on Captain Tom finding him before the rendezvous. There ain't one chance out of a hundred of his doing it; but he can do it, if anybody can. That's about it, ain't it Tom?" and he turned inquiringly to his companion.

"There's 'bout as much chance of finding Kit in the mountains as there would be of finding a tree-toad in a medder," Captain Tom answered. "But we're sartain to overhaul him at the rendezvous. Let me see them guns of yourn," and his eyes rested on the two rifles carried by the boys.

Rex and Dill each promptly handed him his gun. The rifles were both the latest make and the best

quality. Captain Tom examined the weapons carefully, handling them almost caressingly.

"They are mighty good looking and feeling guns," he said, throwing each to his shoulder in turn and sighting quickly along its barrel, "but a little light for grizzly bear and Indian shooting. Now that is my style of a gun," and his eyes turned fondly to the corner of the room where stood his heavy long-barreled Remington, big and hard and powerful looking like its owner. "That's the kind of a gun for grizzly bear and Indian shooting; but I reckon 'twould be too heavy for a boy to tote around. Now let's see the rest of your outfits;" and one by one the critical eyes of the experienced old trapper carefully examined the articles in the boys' outfits, laying each down in one of two piles, when he had done so.

"You won't need them," he said, pointing to one of the piles, as soon as his examination was over. "Leave them with Captain Young. Now," and he turned to the trader, "you see to the outfitting, and I'll get the trappers together and have a talk with them. I have a lot to do before Monday, and must be doing it," and he hastened from the room, leaving two rather crestfallen boys ruefully regarding the discarded pile of things that Captain Tom had so unceremoniously indicated was not to be taken with them.

"Tom is right," and Captain Young smiled. "You'll not need them things. A trapper always

goes in light marching order, discarding every ounce of unnecessary weight. I'll see that you have everything that you need. Now camp right in this room. You can make your bed on that pile of bear skins," and he pointed to a pile of grizzly bear skins in one corner of the room; "and go to bed whenever you get ready. I won't be in 'til late, so don't wait for me," and the door closed behind the trader.

Rex and Dill remained for a few minutes in the office, talking and stowing away their outfits, then they went out into the store and watched the busy clerks and the trappers and the Indians and the Mexicans who gathered there for purposes of trade or "talk," and finally they passed out into the crowded streets.

By this time the shadows of night had begun to settle down in the dark places of the streets, and the candles in the houses were being lit. Already a cool breeze had begun to temper the heat of the day; and Rex and Dill found the greater part of the population of Santa Fé out in the open air, enjoying the cool evening. The *plaza publica* was crowded; and men, women and children swarmed around the wagons of the *Americanos* like bees around a hive. The lights of the various resorts, where vile liquors, gambling and their attendant evils held their votaries, shone redly out into the dark street, while through their wide-opened doors and windows came the sounds of tinkling banjos and other musical instruments, the clatter of many dancing feet and the

laughter of men and women. Santa Fé was making merry over the coming of the *Americanos* and the caravan.

For a minute or two Rex and Dill paused just outside of the store, to get their bearings and to watch the animated and novel scene before them.

"Let's walk around the plaza and take in the sights," Dill suggested, as his eyes roamed over the varied scenes of the *plaza publica.*

Rex promptly agreeing, they started, pausing often to look at the many things that awakened their curiosity and interest.

Suddenly both boys were startled by the sharp, crack—crack, of a pistol and the sounds of a wild commotion coming from a dance hall only a few feet ahead of them. Then, before either lad fairly knew what was happening, out through the wide-opened door of the dance hall shot a great black ball that rolled and bounded until with a mad yell it struck the ground directly in front of their feet—and the astounded boys were looking down into the terror-stricken face of a negro boy, whose rolling eyes and up-lifted hands were raised appealingly to them.

"Sabe me! Sabe dis niggah!" he cried, the black hands clutching frantically the trouser-legs of both lads. "O, Lo'd! don't let him done cotch me!" and the rolling eyes turned a frightened glance backward just as a huge red-whiskered man, his face

inflamed with whiskey and passion, a huge knife in one hand, rushed out of the dance hall, followed by a motley crowd of Mexicans and Americans. "He's done gwine to skin me alive!" and the negro clung, in a frenzy of fear, tightly to the legs of the boys.

At this moment the bully caught sight of the negro boy groveling at the feet of Rex and Dill.

"Hi, you black imp of th' devil!" he shouted, "now I'll have that hide of yourn," and he sprang toward the spot where the negro lay.

Possibly he had no thought of really harming the negro lad, possibly he intended only to frighten him; but those were wild, lawless days when wild, lawless men frequently gave full rein to all their brutal passions and did the most cruel deeds, when half-crazed with rum and rage. I am not writing of the Santa Fé of to-day, but of the Santa Fé of seventy-five years ago.

For a moment Rex and Dill knew not what to do, then the instinct of true manhood, aroused in defense of the weak and helpless, asserted itself in the bosom of each lad simultaneously—and, to his very great astonishment, the huge red-whiskered bully found himself confronting two very white-faced but determined American lads, who had suddenly stepped in between him and the negro boy.

"Stop!" shouted Rex. "Stop!" and his right hand went quickly to the haft of the hunting-knife

in his belt, the only weapon he had with him, and his strong young body threw itself intuitively into an attitude of self-defense.

Dill said nothing. There was no need. His actions spoke for him. He stood bravely by the side of Rex, his face white, but his eyes flashing with indignation, and his whole attitude saying as plainly as had Rex's words, "Stop! Stop!"

And the big bully did stop, not ten feet from where the lads stood, his flushed face and blood-shot eyes staring in an astonishment that was quickly changing into rage at the two boys who had dared to come between him and the negro boy.

"Git out of th' way!" and the knife was raised threateningly. "Git out of th' way, or I'll—" A vicious thrust of the knife finished the sentence. "This ain't none of your affair. It's atween me an' that black skunk. Now, git!" and his voice rose into a roar of rage. "I'll have that nigger's hide, if I have tew take yourn with it," and he leaped straight toward the boys.

Rex and Dill were not cowards. They had often proven their courage, even to the point of facing death; but, when that great brute, half-drunken and wild with rage, hurled himself upon them, both lads felt the most terrible fear they had ever known—and proved themselves the possessors of the truest kind of courage, the kind that can bravely face danger when afraid; for they stood their ground in spite of their fear.

DILL HURLED HIMSELF AT THE MAN'S LEGS.

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Rex, at the leap of the bully, sprang aside to avoid the thrust of the knife, for the man had sprung straight toward him, probably because he was the larger of the two boys, and in self-defense drew his own knife; but Dill, seeing the peril of his comrade, hurled himself at the man's legs, like a modern football tackle, and brought the great brute to the ground with a suddenness that shook every bone in the big body.

"Now, I'll 'tend tew this here modern Goliah, who goes about seekin' what boys, white an' black, he can devour," and a huge hand reached down and jerked Dill to his feet just in time to save him from a wicked thrust of the knife, while the kick of a booted foot sent the knife flying a rod through the air.

Rex had sprung promptly to Dill's aid; but the same hand that had gripped Dill caught him and thrust him back.

"Them red whiskers is my meat. Now jest stand back and watch me chaw them," and Hammer Jones, a look in his blue eyes that the boys had never seen there before, thrust both lads behind him and faced the bully, who was struggling to his feet, swearing horribly. In another moment the man stood on his feet, Hammer Jones making no move to prevent him, and was glaring into the eyes of his new antagonist.

"Come on, whiskers," encouraged Ham, shaking his great hammer-like fist. "I ain't no helpless little

nigger, nor yit even a white boy; but I'm a man what's goin' tew give you th' durndest wallopin' a man ever had or git one myself—Hi, let that knife alone!" and his right hand went quickly to the butt of the pistol in his belt, as the man made a swift movement toward the spot where the knife lay. "We'll jest fight this out in th' good American way —with our fists, an' without any knife stabbin' or pistol shootin', unless you compels me tew do th' shootin'."

The man stopped short and turned a pair of glaring eyes on Ham.

"'Tain't none of yer affair," he glowered. Then, noting the bulk and fighting look of his antagonist, the wind suddenly went out of the sails of his courage and left them flapping. "I won't really meanin' tew harm th' nigger or th' yunks," he continued, glancing furtively around the crowd that by this time had gathered. "Jest wanted tew scare th' nig tew hear him yell an' see him run."

"Great fun, wasn't it?" queried Ham. "Want some more?"

"Sartain," and the man grinned.

"Good. You shall have all you want," and, with a yell that made every man in the crowd jump a foot high, Hammer Jones suddenly drew his knife and flourishing it around his head sprang straight toward the bully.

The man gave one terrified glance at the coming man and knife, and then turned and ran shrieking

down the street, as badly frightened as the negro boy had been, with Hammer Jones yelling at every jump after him, and followed by the crowd wild with excitement. In a dozen jumps Ham had overtaken the man, and now, about every third step, he managed to get in a tremendous kick, that would bring a yell, like the shriek of a steam calliope, out of the bully.

In this way they ran for perhaps a dozen rods, when they came to where the street passed close to a particularly vile and muddy pond of green-scummed water; and with one last tremendous kick Ham sent the fellow sprawling headfirst into this pond. When he came out he was a sight for gods and men; and, dripping mud and curses, he rushed to his horse, mounted and rode out of Santa Fé amid the jeers, so it seemed, of every man and child in town.

Rex and Dill had followed close behind Ham, and now the big fellow turned to them.

"You yunks must a-been wantin' tew commit suicide," he said frowning, "tew git in th' way of Greaser Smith when he's wild with drink. He'd have stuck that knife in you sartain, seein' you was only boys. He's as brave as a lion, when it comes tew fightin' boys; but men—wal, you seed how he'd fight a man, th' cowardly skunk. But I reckon he won't do any more braggin' in Santa Fé," and Ham grinned joyously, as he thought of the looks of the bully as he emerged dripping from the pond.

"Now, you boys better git back tew Young's quarters, an' stay there 'til mornin'. Santa Fé is goin' tew be some wild tew-night a-celebratin' th' comin' of th' Americanos—Hi, nigger, what you wantin' now? Ain't you got these young fellers in enough trouble for one night?" and Ham turned a scowling face on the negro boy, who had followed Rex and Dill and now crept up close behind them.

"I done wants to t'ank dem fo' sabin' dis niggah's hide," the black answered. "I's pow'ful obligated," and he bowed his kinky head first to Rex then to Dill.

Rex and Dill both laughed. They could not help it, so irresistibly funny was the appearance of the negro boy as he stood bowing before them, while the scowl on Ham's face quickly changed to a grin that threatened to swallow both ears.

The body of the negro lad looked as if it had been modeled after an inflated football, so round and plump it was, while his head was almost exactly the shape of a fat pumpkin, with round, plump cheeks, glistening white teeth and little, round eyes, almost swallowed by the surrounding fat. To this body were attached two very fat arms and two very fat legs. An old woolen shirt and a pair of trousers cut off at the knees partially covered the glistening black skin of the legs and the body, but the feet were bare and the kinky black hair was uncovered. He was considerably shorter than Dill was, but looked to be about his age. Now, imagine this ludicrous

round ebony figure bowing and scraping before the two boys, and you will understand why they laugh and how the grin came on Ham's face.

"It wasn't us that saved your hide. It was Ham. That big fellow there. You'd better thank him," Rex said, as soon as he could control his laughter sufficiently to speak.

" 'Deed I will. I's much obligated to dat man wid de mule kick. 'Deed I'll t'ank him," and he whirled about and began bowing and scraping before Ham.

"That's all right, sonny," Ham said. "Couldn't nohow see such a jolly black skinful of fat pricked with such an ugly lookin' knife. Could we, yunks?" and Ham winked to the two boys. "Now, what might your name be?"

"I's done named," and the fat little figure straightened up proudly, "I's done named Napolyun Bonapart Jerusal'm Jones; but 'most folks done calls me Pom, 'cose I's got so much pompusity, an' Pom am short fo' pompusity. Dun know what dat pompusity am, but 'specks it's jes' a big name fo' fat. I's an uncommon fat niggah," and the black little imp spread out his fat legs, thrust out his fat chest and threw back his round head until he looked the very picture of pomposity done in ebony.

All this amused Rex and Dill very much and they determined to take the negro lad back with them to the store. Pom, as we will call him, accepted their invitation with alacrity; and, taking Ham's advice,

the three returned to Captain Young's at once. Here they learned that the negro boy had no home, no friends and no money; and, pitying him and feeling that his comicalities would more than repay them for their trouble, they insisted on his spending the night with them, and made a bed for him on the great pile of skins in the back part of the room.

CHAPTER IV

OFF FOR THE MOUNTAINS

THE three following days were very interesting and very busy days for Rex and Dill. There was the party of trappers to outfit and get ready for the long expedition to the Rocky Mountains; and of course both boys took the greatest interest in watching this outfitting process. Then there were the trappers themselves, men who had trapped and hunted all through the Rocky Mountain regions, and knew their wonders and perils, as sailors know the seas. The boys were never tired of listening to their tales of the wild and adventurous life of the plains and the mountains and to their descriptions of scenery so grand and wonderful that even these rude, uncultured men spoke of it in awe and reverence. And then there was Santa Fé, that quaint old Aztec-Spanish-Mexican town, the oldest white settlement in the territory of the United States, to explore. Rex and Dill never wearied of watching its picturesque inhabitants as they went about their work or pleasures, nor of wandering through its crooked dirty streets, populous with dogs and children. And everywhere the boys went they were followed by their black satellite, Pom, the negro

boy, who, from the night of his adventure with Greaser Smith, had attached himself to them with a dog-like affection and devotion that neither boy had the heart to repulse. Then he was such a jolly, good-natured, comical, little fellow, always doing or saying something to cause a hearty laugh, always so willing to help when his help was needed, that, before the three days were up, both boys had become so attached to him that neither cared to get rid of him, and even prevailed upon Captain Tom Roberts to allow them to take Pom with them to the mountains.

"He knows how to cook and can help about the camp," argued Rex.

"He's as funny as a circus and will keep us all good-natured," added Dill.

And Captain Tom had agreed, not without a little grumbling, that the negro boy should go, to the delight of Pom as well as to the satisfaction of the boys.

There was one other member of the party of trappers that Rex and Dill were overjoyed to have go with them. This was Hammer Jones, who had been a trapper before he had been a wagoner, and who needed but little urging to enlist under Captain Tom, for whom he had great admiration. Besides he had become very fond of the two lads during the long wagon journey from Independence to Santa Fé, and was really very glad to be with them longer.

Yes, Rex and Dill were two very busy and two very interested boys during these three days; but at last Monday morning dawned cool and clear, and the great day had come.

Long before sunrise the two boys were up and out assisting the trappers pack the mules. There were eighteen thick Mexican blankets—one for each man and boy in the party—a dozen or more kettles, frying-pans and coffee pots, several small bags of coffee, sugar, salt and flour, a couple of hundred steel traps, a large quantity of powder and lead, a number of dressed deerskins with which to replace clothing and moccasins when worn out, a dozen or so hatchets and axes, smoking tobacco, an extra woolen shirt for each member of the party, two large, heavy canvas tents, an unusual luxury, and a number of minor articles; and all these had to be packed on the backs of the patient mules—thirty in number, fifteen to carry the packs and the others to be ridden by the trappers until loaded with furs. In addition to these animals there were ten horses. Captain Tom Roberts had a fine black stallion that he called Don Lucifer. Rex and Dill each had purchased a sturdy pony, inured to the hardships of mountain life, and Hammer Jones and six of the trappers had horses.

By sunrise everything was ready for the start. Captain Tom sprang upon the back of Don Lucifer. Rex and Dill mounted their ponies. The trappers leaped gaily into their saddles. The white bell-

mule stood at the head of the pack-train. Only Pom stood hesitating by the side of his mule, a small, particularly long-eared, wicked looking animal, of a dirty-yellowish color, called Brimstone.

"All aboard!" shouted Dill.

"Hurry!" cried Rex.

But Pom still stood, eyeing the mule apprehensively, one hand holding the bridle rein and the other resting on the pommel of the saddle. Every now and then he would give a little hitch upward with his body, as if he were about to mount, whereupon the mule would give a vicious switch with his tail, and Pom would instantly become quiet.

"Get him a ladder," called one of the trappers.

"Wait a moment an' I'll give you a boost," and Hammer Jones, his eyes twinkling, rode up close to where the negro stood. "Now," and he sprang off his horse, "give me your foot," and he caught hold of one of Pom's fat legs just below the knee.

"Ca'eful! Ca'eful, Massah Jones, ca'eful!—Whoa! Whoa-a Brimstone!" and Pom, his round face looking as full of apprehension as it would if he were about to sit down on a live volcano, gingerly placed one foot in the stirrup.

"Shucks, Pom, he's as gentle as a suckin' lamb. Now, he-ho, he-ho—heave!" and Ham, with a tremendous upward heave, fairly lifted Pom off his feet and sat him in the saddle.

The mule stood stock-still.

For an instant the look of dreadful apprehension

remained on Pom's face; and then, seeing that nothing happened, it gave way to a look of triumph, and his round head went back proudly, his fat chest puffed out pompously and he gave the reins a wicked jerk.

"I's done ready. What yo' waitin' fo'?" and his eyes glanced triumphantly around the little cavalcade, as if they had all been waiting for him to mount, as, indeed, they had. "Go-lang, yo' ol' Brimstone! Go-lang!" and he dug both heels into the mule's bony sides. "Go-lang, or I's gwine to wallop de skin off yo' bones."

But Brimstone only switched his tail, turned his head and looked at Pom.

"Give him a lick with your quirt," yelled one of the delighted trappers.

"Yo' t'ink dis niggah done know how to ride dis mule?" and Pom glanced a bit contemptuously at his adviser. "I's done ride mo' mules dan yo' ebber seed, white man; an' dis heah ol' slabsided—Hi, dar, don't yo' shake yo' rabbit ears at me, yo' ol' yeller-skinned bag o' bones! Now, I's gwine to make him go mighty sudden. Git up!" and Pom, encouraged by the mule's continued quiescence, brought his quirt down smartly across Brimstone's flank.

And the mule did "go mighty sudden"; so sudden that Pom, at the first jump, was hurled off his back and sent rolling over the soft grass of the prairie, pulling up handfuls of grass at every roll.

Pom sat up and glared at Brimstone.

The mule stopped short, faced about, and, stretching out his head toward the negro boy, flapped his long ears and brayed loudly and triumphantly.

This was too much for Pom, and, jumping to his feet, he shook his fists angrily at the mule.

"Stop dat dar crowin'!" he shouted. "Stop yo' crowin', yo' fool mule. I done 'low no mule to crow ober dis niggah. I's gwine to ride yo' now, if I busticates ebbery bone in mah skel'ton," and Pom started for the mule, his round face puckered into a look of dire determination.

The trappers shouted and laughed their delight, and gathered around Pom and his mule, and back of them gathered half the populace of Santa Fé. The negro was showing that he had grit. This was better than they had expected.

Pom marched straight to the mule.

The mule flapped his big ears and switched his tail, but otherwise stood motionless.

Pom gripped the bridle rein with one hand, the pommel of the saddle with the other, placed one foot in the stirrup, and by a tremendous effort heaved his body into the saddle, and, gripping his legs tightly about the body of the mule and holding on to the pommel of the saddle firmly with his left hand, he raised the quirt in his right hand.

During all this the mule stood absolutely motionless, save for the flapping of his big ears and the switching of his tail.

"Yo'll crow ober dis niggah, will yo'? Lab right in mah face! Now, yo' ol' fool mule, I's done gwine to show yo' who's mastah. Git up!" and Pom brought the whip down with all the strength of his fat arm across the hip of Brimstone.

Again the mule jumped and bucked and kicked and grunted; and Pom bumped and bounded and grunted, but he stuck to the saddle, gripping the pommel with both hands and holding on for dear life. Backward, forward, sideways, rearing, plunging, kicking whirled, dashed and jumped the mule for about two minutes; and then, as suddenly as he had begun he stopped and turned his head and looked at Pom in mulish disgust.

And Pom was there all right, only, somehow in the mixup, he had lost hold of the pommel of the saddle and had caught hold of the mule's tail, which he was now tightly gripping with both hands, his fat body stretched along the back and his feet hugging the neck of the mule.

"Golly," and Pom let go of the mule's tail and cautiously straightened up in the saddle, "dat mule am loaded wid greased lightnin' fo' sho'. I done thought he's gwine to knock mah spinal meningitus t'ro' mah medder oblongater." (Pom had once served for a year or two as a doctor's servant and had gathered a weird and wonderful vocabulary of medical terms, that he used whenever he thought the occasion demanded something a little out of the ordinary.)

How the trappers did shout and laugh and cheer, until every sleeper in Sante Fé sprang out of bed and rushed out of doors to see what the matter was! Pom had proven that somewhere in that mass of fat he had a backbone, and had jumped up many notches in the estimation of the trappers, who had been disposed to treat the negro boy as a buffoon. Indeed, this mule, whose tricks were well known, had been given to Pom for the especial purpose of making sport; and now that the circus was over and Pom was victor, all were ready to begin the journey in the best possible spirits.

"Everybody get ready!" shouted Captain Tom, the moment a lull in the hilarity gave him the opportunity.

Again the trappers, those who had dismounted, leaped gaily to the backs of their mules or horses; and all sat waiting the command to start.

"Now, you boys just make the best of whatever luck comes, and remember that real pluck and grit will 'most always win out, even in the most desperate situations," Captain Young said, as he gripped the hand of each boy. "A trapper gets some mighty hard knocks, but, if he stands up and takes them like a man, they only make him the harder. May fortune favor you, my boys!" and with a warm shake of the hand Captain Young turned to where Tom Roberts sat on Don Lucifer.

For a couple of minutes the two men stood talking—Captain Young was giving his final instruc-

tions, then they shook hands and Tom Roberts turned in his saddle.

"Advance!" he commanded, and, heading his horse to the northward, rode slowly away toward the distant ranges of the Rocky Mountains. And close behind him rode Rex and Dill, followed by the negro boy and the pack-mule train, a trapper riding by the side of each pack-mule. Thus, just as the sun rose above the hills to the east, the little cavalcade of trappers rode through the streets of Santa Fé, with many farewells and good wishes from bright-eyed senoritas and dark-skinned dons, and out on to the surrounding plains, and slowly crawled up the hillsides, until at last it wound its way over the brow of a hill—and the backward-turning eyes of Rex and Dill had looked upon Santa Fé for the last time for many long months. From that moment the little band of trappers was thrown absolutely upon its own resources.

CHAPTER V

AN ADVENTURE WITH A GRIZZLY

IF some of my readers will pick up an old geography, bearing the date of about 1833—the date of the beginning of this tale—and turn to the map of North America, they will find that the greater part of what is now Western United States was at that time an unexplored wilderness of mountains and plains and valleys inhabited only by wild Indians and wild animals. Along the coast of California, it is true, the Spaniards from Mexico had established a number of missions, for the conversion of the Indians to their form of religion, which had flourished until now they had become rich in herds and growing fields of grain and fruits. Around each of these missions a few Spanish settlers and a large number of semi-civilized Indians had gathered; but all the rest of the vast territory from the Pacific Ocean eastward to the Missouri River was practically "unexplored territory" to all geographers; and in all this enormous realm there was not a single permanent white settlement north of Santa Fé and Taos—only roaming bands of white trappers, and tribes of unnumbered Indians.

Think, boys, of what seventy-five years have wrought for your country!

And of all the *dramatis personæ* who played a part in bringing about these wonderful changes, none performed a more important rôle than did these same humble trappers, a typical party of whom we have just seen start out into this unknown wilderness. They were the real explorers, the true pathfinders of these Western Wilds.

First came the trapper and hunter, then the scientific explorer, then the pioneer settler, and lastly the farmer and the railroad—this was the true ordering of the march of civilization westward from the Mississippi to the Pacific; and of these the trapper and hunter alone had to depend solely on himself. He had no blazer-of-the-way, no guide, only his good rifle and his undauntable courage.

I have paused long enough to write this, because I wish my readers to understand the important part the kind of men with whom we are to sojourn played in the upbuilding of our West. Some day some American Homer will write the epic of the Western trapper; and place him, where he belongs, in the forefront of American heroes.

But, to return to our young friends.

There were fourteen men, every one of them chosen for his known courage and skill and pluck and endurance, in Captain Tom Roberts's band of trappers. This, with Captain Tom himself and the three boys, made eighteen men and boys—a small

enough number when you consider that they were going into a country where there were hundreds of hostile Indians who would be constantly on the watch for opportunities to rob and kill.

They did not expect to begin trapping operations until they reached the North Fork of the Platte River, many days distant from Santa Fé. Here they were to begin putting out traps and to work slowly down stream until they came to the Sweetwater, one of its tributaries. Up this stream they were to continue trapping to its head-waters, and thence, if the snows of winter did not prevent, they were to cross over into the valley of the Green River, and work in this region until it was time to go to the rendezvous.

Such, briefly outlined, was the itinerary Captain Young and Tom Roberts had planned for our friends, as being the one most likely to bring them into the region of Kit Carson's trapping operations. Now, if you will turn to a map of the United States, and, beginning at Santa Fé, roughly trace with your finger the route here indicated, you will learn something of the magnitude of the journey before Rex and Dill—a thousand miles or more of roadless, bridgeless country; and all to be traversed by the slow feet of horses and mules.

But no thoughts of the future, of coming hardships or dangers, troubled the two boys, as they rode gaily along through the clear, cool morning air, with Pom following at a respectful distance

behind on Brimstone. The mule, from the moment he had turned his head and looked his disgust to find the negro boy still on his back had been all that a well-behaved mule should be and had walked along under the weight of his new master as sedately as any mule in the train.

"How I wish Tom and Will and Frank and the rest of the boys back in New Orleans might see us now!" Rex said, with boyish enthusiasm, as his eyes glanced up and down the string of trappers and pack-mules that stretched for a dozen rods or more along the trail. "Wouldn't they like to be with us now?" and his face glowed and his eyes sparkled.

"You bet, they would," was Dill's boyish answer. "We're really and truly trappers now, and I am beginning to feel more like a man already," and his eyes lighted. "Someway this going right out into the wilderness, where one has to depend on himself for everything, makes a fellow, even if he is a boy, feel like a man."

"Indeed it does," agreed Rex. "I feel as if I had grown about two inches in the last two hours," and he straightened up in his saddle, threw back his head and laughed.

And, indeed, it was an attractive and romantic picture that the two boys and their companions presented, as they rode slowly—they could not go faster than a walk on account of the pack-mules—now up some steep declivity, now through a deep ravine, now across a lovely valley, always surrounded by

the wild and picturesque scenery of the yet unbroken wilderness, the bell of the lead-mule tinkling, the men laughing and joking and calling to one another—they were in safe country now—and around them only the sounds and the life of the wilderness.

Boys, look long at this picture. Never again will these fearless men ride forth in the wild freedom of their untrammeled manhood to brave the perils and to conquer the hardships of the free plains and mountains. The deerskin dress, the fur cap, the long rifle, the beaded moccasins, the stalwart, muscular bodies, the bronzed faces, the fearless eyes, the free, bold spirits—all, alas! belong to a past that can never return. But, boys, we can admire and emulate their courage and pluck and endurance and honesty—those stirling qualities of character belonging alike to all true men, and we can hold in grateful remembrance the debt we—America—owe to their memory.

At noon Captain Tom halted on the banks of a clear, cool stream of water; and the trappers went into camp for a couple of hours. The packs were taken off the backs of the mules; and all the animals were hobbled and turned loose to graze on the rich grass that grew near the water. A half a dozen fires were built; and soon the coffee was boiling in the pots and the meat was roasting on wooden spits. When the meal was over, Ham picked up his rifle.

"I reckon I'll try an' git some fresh meat, Captain," he said.

"All right. Get back in an hour," and Captain Tom stretched himself out on the soft grass at ease.

"Oh, can't we go with you?" and Rex and Dill both sprang to their feet.

"I'm willin', if th' Captain is," and Ham glanced to where Captain Tom lay.

Captain Tom smiled and nodded; and the next minute Rex and Dill had their rifles in their hands and were standing by Ham's side.

"We'll see what's a-top of that ridge," and Ham pointed to a wooded ridge lying about a quarter of a mile back of their camp. "I thought I saw a deer or two slip into th' woods, jest afore we stopped to camp," and he started off in the direction of the ridge, with the eager boys in close attendance.

Rex and Dill had often hunted deer, as well as other and more dangerous animals, in the wilds of Louisiana, and both were good shots with their rifles. Consequently, when they separated just before entering the woods, so as to approach the game from three separate points, the boys knew how to conduct themselves almost as well as did Ham himself.

"I reckon we'll find deer afore we get a-top th' ridge, so keep your eyes peeled an' be ready to shoot on th' jump," was Ham's parting advice.

Rex entered the woods about ten rods to the right of Ham, and Dill about the same distance to his left.

The ridge was some two hundred feet high, with steep rocky sides covered quite thickly with cottonwood trees and underbrush.

The three hunters saw no game until they were near the top, then Rex, who had been moving upward as noiselessly as possible, heard a rustle of leaves in a thick clump of underbrush a couple of rods to his right and a few feet higher up the ridge —and instantly stopped, his rifle thrown to his shoulder, ready to fire the moment the expected deer bounded out of the brush. For a moment he stood thus, his eyes on the clump of bushes, his finger on the trigger of his rifle; and then, to his horror, the bushes suddenly parted and a huge grizzly bear rushed out and charged straight for him, her little round eyes red with rage.

For one terrible instant Rex was absolutely paralyzed with fear. He could not move a muscle, not so much as to press the trigger of his rifle. He could not utter a sound, not even to warn Ham and Dill of his danger.

The grizzly, when about a rod away, suddenly stopped, reared up on her hind legs, and, with an angry growl, prepared to hurl herself upon the petrified boy. But at this instant, Rex awoke from his horrible night-mare, and, with a yell that was heard back in camp, fired his rifle, dropped the gun,

and, whirling about, ran for a large tree a rod below him, up which he climbed with such speed, that, when the bear reached the bottom of the trunk, he was twenty feet up the tree and still going.

A grizzly bear is not a good tree climber, unless the tree is a large one with an abundance of knots and limbs for footholds. But, unfortunately, this was exactly the kind of a tree Rex, in his flight, had elected to climb; and the bear, after a moment's pause to growl her rage and defiance, promptly started up after him.

At this moment Ham came tearing through the brush, and in an instant his keen eyes had taken in the situation—Rex up a tree and a grizzly bear going up after him.

This, you will please remember, was before the date of the repeating rifle, or even that of the breech-loader, when every separate charge of powder had to be poured into the muzzle of the barrel and every patched bullet had to be driven home with the ram-rod. It took time then to load a rifle; and, when loaded, the hunter had only one small bullet between him and whatever danger threatened. This made the killing of a grizzly bear an altogether different proposition from what it is to-day, with the high-power, rapid-fire modern rifle; and it was seldom that any hunter, however brave, cared to provoke a fight with one of these monsters, whose thick hide and tough bones and tremendous vitality was almost sure to require more than one of these small

balls to drive the life out of his huge body. The grizzly bear was the most ferocious, the most dreaded by whites and Indians alike, of all the animals of the West; and for a white man or an Indian to kill one single-handed was enough to give the killer a reputation for bravery for the rest of his life.

Hammer Jones was a brave man; but he knew the grizzly bear, knew that the one small ball of lead in his rifle was all that stood between him and the claws and the teeth of the brute. If that one bullet failed of being immediately fatal, he knew that the wounded grizzly would drop from the tree and be upon him before he could reload his rifle—and that meant almost certain death. Hammer Jones knew all this; but he was cool and unafraid. It was a moment when haste might mean the waste of his life. He must make that one bullet do its fatal work.

The bear had now climbed some ten feet up the tree and was still working his way clumsily upward toward Rex, who had mounted as high as possible, and, drawing his hunting-knife, his panic over, sat coolly awaiting the bear. Neither Rex nor the bear saw Ham. They had eyes only for each other.

Hammer Jones ran close to the trunk of the tree; and then, throwing his rifle to his shoulder, waited until a movement of the foreleg of the grizzly would expose the spot just back and under the shoulder blade where his bullet was most sure to be fatal.

For a minute—to the anxious man it seemed like an hour—he stood, motionless as if he had been frozen stiff, his rifle leveled, his eye glancing along the barrel, his finger on the trigger; and then the grizzly, in reaching upward for a limb, uncovered the fatal spot, and Ham fired.

With a roar that started half the men in camp running to their aid, the grizzly let go her hold on the tree and fell to the ground.

"You've got her! You've got her!" excitedly yelled Rex, beginning to climb down from the tree.

But Ham had not "got her" yet; for almost the instant the grizzly struck the ground, she reared up on her hind-legs, and, with blood and foam dropping from her mouth, she charged straight toward the big fellow.

Ham jerked out his hunting-knife; but, before he could use it, before the grizzly could get to him, a rifle cracked so close to the side of his face that the powder burnt his cheek, and a bullet from Dill's gun struck the bear in the breast, stopping her rush for an instant and knocking her backward. Before she could recover the three bullets had done their fatal work; and, with a final growl and a last desperate effort to reach her enemy, she plunged forward and fell dead at the feet of Hammer Jones.

"Reload! Reload!" Ham warned. "Her mate might be comin' 'long any moment," and with swift hands he began reloading his own rifle; and not until both boys had powder and ball back in their guns

would he allow them to approach the dead grizzly. "Th' first thing to do after shootin' is always load-in'," he explained; "for th' Lord alone knows when a feller will need a gun in this here country, an' when he does need it he needs it loaded."

The guns loaded the three at once began to examine the grizzly. All three balls had taken effect. Rex had hit her in the breast, but too high to touch the heart. Both balls from the guns of Ham and Dill had passed through her heart.

Suddenly, while they were bending over the dead bear, all were startled by the sound of the rush of feet close to them, and the next instant a ball of fur tumbled against Rex, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"Th' cub! Th' cub!" exclaimed Ham. "I knowed she had a cub," and he caught the young bear up by the nape of the neck and held him up for the inspection of the boys.

"Oh, but isn't he a funny little fellow? Don't kill him. I am going to keep him," and Rex reached out and took the squirming little fellow in his arms.

The cub whined and nestled up close to his protector.

"Just look!" exclaimed the delighted boy. "He knows I won't harm him. Why, he's as gentle as a kitten," and he stroked the soft fur.

By this time the men from the camp, headed by Captain Tom, had reached the woods, and were hallooing and calling to know what had happened.

Ham and the boys answered them with triumphant yells; and in another minute Captain Tom and a half dozen of the trappers came crashing through the brush. They quickly gathered around the dead bear, and examined the carcass with all the interest of experts. Not one of them but had had his own battles with grizzlies; and now each, after having listened to how this one was killed, felt called upon to relate some of his own experiences with grizzlies, all of which was intensely interesting to Rex and Dill.

But Captain Tom soon cut this story telling short, and set the men to skinning the bear. The hide off, they cut the choicest steaks from the body, and, loaded with the meat and the skin, returned to camp, Rex still carrying the little bear cub in his arms. In a short time the packs were again on the backs of the mules, and all were ready to resume the journey.

At first Captain Tom had declared that the grizzly cub must be killed; but so earnestly did Rex and Dill plead for the little fellow's life and for permission to take him with them, that at last he reluctantly yielded, thinking that the bother the cub would cause the boys would soon make them willing to get rid of him. Accordingly the two lads took turns in carrying the little animal on the saddles in front of them; and, to the surprise of all, got along with very little trouble on the part of bruin.

CHAPTER VI

A LONELY GRAVE

THAT night Rex and Dill ate their first grizzly bear steak; and both agreed with Ham, that "when a feller's powerful hungry it'll go down all right, but 'tain't no more th' equil of venison than sourcrout is of plumb-puddin'." They found the meat tough, with a peculiar flavor that neither lad liked. Possibly, if the bear had been young and fat, instead of old and poor, the meat would have tasted better.

The camp for the night was pitched in a beautiful little valley, through which flowed a swift stream of pure water, cold with the snows of the mountains. An abundance of grass furnished ample food for the horses and mules, which were hobbled and allowed to feed at will until it began to grow dark, when they were safely picketed near the camp where they could be guarded during the dark hours of the night. The two tents were set up in a little grove of cottonwoods near the water, where there was an abundance of wood for fuel. The packs from the backs of the mules were placed in one of the tents, to protect them from the damp of the night or a possible fall of rain; while the other tent was

reserved for sleeping quarters for the boys and any of the men who cared to seek its shelter for the night. In case of a storm, of course, both tents could be utilized by the trappers; but, unless driven to their shelter by rain, the majority of these hardy men preferred to roll themselves up in their blankets unsheltered save by the broad tent of the skies or the friendly branches of a tree.

When it began to grow dark a great camp-fire was built in front of the two tents, between the trunks of two tall cottonwood trees; and the men, lighting their pipes, squatted down around it for a quiet smoke and talk before rolling themselves up in their blankets for the night.

Rex and Dill never forgot this first night's encampment with the trappers. There were many things to impress it deeply on their memories. The scene itself—the clean white of the new tents glistening in the bright light of the camp-fire under the overhanging shadows of the trees; the swift-flowing waters of the river sparkling redly in the firelight; the surrounding mountains, standing out in the darkness, shadowy, grim, mysterious; the buckskin-dressed men seated around the camp-fire, with its red sparks and flames shooting skyward and lighting up their rugged features; the mysterious surrounding silence of the great wilderness, broken only by the weird sound of the night, the murmurs of the river, the voices of the men and the movements of the restless horses and mules; and high

above all, shining down serenely through the still air, the stars God hung in the mysteries of the skies —all appealed powerfully to the poetry and romance in their young lives.

Then there was the talk of the men. The roaring camp-fire, the smoke from their pipes, the surrounding darkness and silence, all seemed to blend, and to mellow and warm their memories, until they were in exactly the right mood for story telling; and for a couple of hours Rex and Dill listened enthralled to the tales of these hardy Knights of the Plains and the Mountains—thrilling encounters and desperate battles with Indians, bear fights, the hardships and perils and grandeur and mysteries of the mighty mountains—told with all the realistic vividness of an actual actor in the scenes described.

And, when at last the camp-fire had burnt low, and the men, with their saddles for pillows, their rifles by their sides, to protect them from dampness and to have them ready for instant use, should there be need, rolled themselves up in their blankets and stretched themselves out on the ground for sleep, it was two awed and very quiet boys that crept to their tent and prepared for the night's slumber. They had been listening to the deeds of men done in the strenuous times when our country was hot in the matrix.

"I wonder if we will have any such adventures ourselves," Rex said longingly, as he rolled himself up in his blanket.

"I hope so," Dill answered. "But wouldn't the boys back in New Orleans liked to have been with us to-night, sitting around the camp-fire, listening to those thrilling stories from the lips of the men who actually did the things they told about—and they did not seem to think they had done anything out of the ordinary, and they hadn't for them."

"No, not for them," Rex responded, with emphasis on the them. "I tell you, Dill, this is going to be a great trip for us; and, if it wasn't for getting those papers and finding Kit Carson, I'd be just about as happy as a boy can be. But I suppose we'd better be getting to sleep," and he sighed and rolled over and closed his eyes—and in five minutes both boys were sound asleep.

The next morning Rex awoke with a yell. He had felt something cold touch his face, and, sleepily putting out his hand to learn what it was, his fingers had come in contact with the soft fur of some animal, and, having just been dreaming that an enormous grizzly bear was about to swallow him whole, the sudden fright of the touch had brought the yell from him before he was fairly awake. The next instant a low growl, ending in a pathetic whine, told him that it was the grizzly bear cub, which he had tied the night before by means of a buckskin thong fastened around the cub's neck to a stake driven into the ground near the spot where he slept. Rex gathered the little ball of fur into his arms and the cub nestled up to him as contentedly as a kitten.

"What is it? Snakes?" and Ham thrust his head through the tent opening and looked anxiously around.

"No," answered Rex just a little sheepishly; "it was only Buster kissing me good morning." Buster was the name Rex had given the bear cub.

"Well," laughed Ham, "don't let Buster kiss so loud next time. Thought sure 'twas snakes. Now," and he quickly entered the tent, "it's time everybody was up. So tumble out," and reaching down suddenly be caught hold of a blanket in each hand and, with a sudden jerk, tumbled both boys out on the ground.

The trappers were early risers. Up with the sun, was their motto; and, when traveling, they were nearly always ready to start on the day's journey by sunrise.

In a few minutes Rex and Dill were into the few clothes they had taken off, and out where the trappers already had the coffee pots boiling, the "biscuit" baking and the meat roasting. The river was their wash-bowl; and a dash of its cold waters over their faces and heads cleared their brains in short order.

Ham had been out already and shot a deer; so they had venison for breakfast that morning, and to the hungry boys no meat ever tasted better.

Their journey northward was now through an exceedingly rough and picturesque country. When possible they followed the shores of some stream of

water, which often would widen out into beautiful grass-covered flower-decked valleys a mile or more in width, and again would narrow down into canyons, with precipitous walls of solid rock hundreds of feet high. Frequently they were obliged to make wide detours, because there was not room between these walls of rock and the water of the river even for the feet of their mules to pass. Sometimes the trail wound around the sides of a mountain, following a narrow shelf of rocks hundreds of feet high, where a single misstep of man or horse or mule meant instant death on the rocks perhaps five hundred feet below. Again the trail would pass up a mountainside so steep that the trappers had to get behind the pack-mules and push to enable them to carry their loads upward; and, perhaps, in the next hour they would be going down a declivity where the mules had to be held back with ropes in order to keep them from sliding down with the speed of a coasting sled. Once every mule and horse had to be lowered twenty feet with ropes down the precipitous bank of a stream of water; and twice they had to be raised a dozen or more feet through the air in the same manner to get them out of a narrow chasm into which the trail had led them.

Then there were countless bridgeless streams of water to cross, some of them deep and swift and wide, but the majority of them narrow and shallow. These had to be waded or swam or, when too deep and swift, rafted. The rafts were made

by tying a number of logs together with ropes until large enough to bear the weight of a couple of mules or horses and a man. Then these had to be rowed or polled or pulled across the river. Hard, dangerous and frequently very wet work, as Rex and Dill both learned the very first time they crossed a river by this method, both boys being hurled head-first into the swift water by the sudden capsizing of their raft, and rescued only after each lad had swallowed about a gallon of water and been carried by the swift current, notwithstanding both lads were good swimmers, twenty or more rods down the stream. In addition to these perils of river-crossing, there were the dreadful beds of quicksand hidden underneath the water, that would clutch and hold and drag down the strongest man or beast, unless rescue was near.

Once Pom and Brimstone, while crossing a wide but shallow stream of water, were caught in the grip of the death-sands; and the yells that came from the negro boy, who in his fright had jumped off his horse, when he felt the clutch of the sands under the water pulling, pulling him slowly downward, and the contortions of his fat face and body as he vainly strove to free himself from the holds of the sand-devils, would have been ludicrous in the extreme had not his peril been so real and pressing.

A couple of strong ropes were quickly thrown to him, and he was told to fasten one around

his own body under the arms and to tie the other to the pommel of Brimstone's saddle. This done, all the trappers caught hold of the other ends of the ropes; and, with a heave-ho-heave, the mule and the negro boy were yanked out of the sand and hauled, spluttering and sprawling and snorting and blowing, through the water to the safety of the shore. After that nothing could induce Pom or Brimstone to enter a stream of water, unless preceded by the boys or one of the trappers.

"I done feeled de fingahs an' soft cold wet palms ob dem sand debbils creepy-crawlin' up mah legs, fo' to git hold ob dis niggah's essopagus," he declared, "an' I's nebber gwine to gib dem 'nothah chance. I's done got to look out fo' my own eppie-der-mus."

To Pom the sand devils were real devils, with real fingers and soft cold wet palms, seeking to grip him by the throat and pull him under the water; and who would get him sure, if they ever got another hold of him, and Pom intended never again to give them the chance to get that hold.

Another and possibly one of the worst difficulties our trappers had to surmount in their journey northward, was the down-timber. Sometimes a heavy snow-slide or land-slide would mow a wide swath through the trees that covered the mountain-side, piling their trunks one on top the other, as if the devil had been playing jackstraws with them, over a long stretch of ground, leaving an almost

impassable barrier to pack-mules. When one of these patches of down-timber crossed the trail, there was only one of two things for our friends to do—go around it, which might mean hours of the roughest kind of traveling, or cut their way through it with their axes and hatchets, a kind of labor that no trapper enjoyed.

Again, almost without warning, a sudden storm of rain or hail and wind might sweep down upon them from the mountain tops, drenching them to the skins, and filling ravines and chasms and canyons, that a moment before had been dry, with roaring torrents of rushing water. Indeed, twice they had narrow escapes from these sudden mountain floods, having been caught in deep ravines and only saving themselves by climbing for life, pushing and pulling the animals along with them, up the nearly precipitous sides, until above the reach of the water, and remaining there until the flood of water had gone by.

There were many deer and antelope and elk, with now and then a buffalo, in these wild regions, so they never wanted for fresh meat; but they had no time for hunting and only killed what they needed for food. They sometimes saw the Rocky Mountain sheep and the Mountain goat, clambering over the rocks high above their heads; but they did not get within shooting distance of either of these animals. They frequently saw grizzly bears and mountain lions and lynxes and wild cats; and Rex

and Dill between them killed half a dozen lynxes and wild cats and two mountain lions; but no one cared to molest the grizzlies, and only once, when an ill-tempered old fellow charged the whole train, was one killed, and then it took twelve rifle balls to stop him.

"You'll have plenty of hunting when we get into the beaver country," Captain Tom promised the boys, when they saw deer and antelope and buffalo almost within gunshot, and yet were not permitted to go after them. "If you want to find Kit Carson before the snows of winter come, we must get to the beaver country just as soon as we can; and then 'tain't at all likely we will run onto Kit 'til we get to the rendezvous, but 'tis our only chance."

And with this promise the boys, who never saw a deer without wishing to go on the hunt, were obliged to be content.

They saw many Indians, but usually in small scattered parties of a few families each. At that season of the year nearly all the tribes were out on the plains, where the great herds of buffalos were. The Indian depended largely upon the buffalo for his food, and always, when possible, kept near his source of supplies. This was the reason why Captain Tom had taken the mountain route northward. By so doing he hoped to avoid meeting large and warlike parties of Indians, who might attack his small band of trappers and prove a constant source of annoyance and danger.

Captain Tom was an exceedingly cautious leader. When in a region where the Indians were suspected in the least of being hostile, he always kept two of his best men a hundred rods or more in advance of the main body, to prevent ambuscading or sudden and unexpected meetings with bands of warriors. At night the horses and mules were corralled near where the trappers slept; and, as an additional precaution against the Indians stampeding them, each animal was strongly hobbled. During the hours of darkness three men were always on guard, the guard being divided into watches of three hours each.

Nearly all Indians, even those who were thought to be friendly, were inveterate horse thieves and the trappers had to be constantly on the watch to guard against their depredations. In those uninhabited wilds it was almost impossible to replace a stolen horse or mule; and, as these animals were invaluable to the trappers—carrying themselves and their outfits, transporting their furs to market, and even, sometimes, yielding up their lives to keep them from starving—the trappers guarded them as carefully as they did their own lives.

The mosquitoes and the flies were a never ceasing source of discomfort to men and beasts, except when the chill of the night stiffened their wings and made them torpid. During the warm hours of the day they bit and stung and buzzed and whirled in swarms around the heads of the men and the bodies

of the animals, to their very great annoyance, but, fortunately, that was as far as their power of evil went.

Such were the scenes witnessed, such the hardships and perils endured and braved, such the methods of traveling pursued by our little band of trappers, as for nearly four weeks, they slowly journeyed northward, without meeting with any serious accidents or fatal misadventures, although something interesting or amusing or adventurous was constantly occurring. But now, because of other and more important coming events, we can only thus briefly allude to the details of this journey and must hasten with our friends into the beaver country, where they are to begin their trapping and their hunt for Kit Carson.

On the twenty-fifth day out from Santa Fé, about an hour before sunset, Captain Tom Roberts and Hammer Jones, who were doing scout duty some hundred rods in advance of the train of trappers, suddenly halted their horses on the top of a high rocky ridge toward which they had been riding across a small valley, and, turning in their saddles, pulled off their hats, and, swinging them around their heads, gave the wild view-halloo of the plains.

Instantly all was excitement in the little band of trappers.

"It's a herd of buffalos!" shouted one, whipping up his mule.

"Hurrah, it's the Platte!" yelled another. "Git

up, Blinks," and he hit his mule a stinging crack with his quirt, and galloped off in the direction of Captain Tom and Ham.

"Hurry!" cried Rex to Dill, as he whipped up his horse. "Let's be the first to get there. Oh, I hope it is a herd of buffalos, and that Captain Tom will let us hunt them!" and, with Dill riding close by his side, the excited boy sped as fast as he could make his pony go toward the spot where Captain Tom and Ham were still swinging their hats and yelling.

"Tell dem I's comin' too, like er yeller streak ob lightnin'," called Pom, as, lashing Brimstone, he started after the boys, his mule bounding over the ground like a large jack-rabbit, while he bounded up and down on the mule's back, as if he were made out of black rubber.

Rex and Dill were mounted on two exceptionally fleet ponies; and they were soon at the head of the procession of galloping horses and mules, and rode up to where Captain Tom and Ham still sat on their horses a good five rods in the lead.

"What is it? Where is it?" shouted both boys, pulling up their ponies.

"There's the Platte, and there's your buffalo! You shall have your buffalo hunt to-morrow," and Captain Tom first pointed across the little valley stretching below them to where in the distance a stream of water showed, and then on beyond the

stream of water to where the valley was black with thousands of buffalos.

"Wh-e-w!" exclaimed Rex, as his eyes took in the vastness of the herd. "There must be millions of them!"

"No-up," laughed Ham. "Only nine hundred an' ninety-nine thousand, seven hundred an' ninety-two. Me an' Tom 's jest counted 'em."

"Golly, am dem black spots all buffafellers!" grinned Pom, the whites of his eyes growing wider and rounder, as he brought Brimstone to a halt by the side of the boys. "Dat am de biggest bunch ob humpback cows dat dis niggah done did ebber seed. I's gwine to kill one ob dem buffafellers, jes' fo' to show dem low scan'lous niggahs back dar in Santa Fé dat a Kentuck niggah ain't scart ob nothin'," and Pom puffed out his fat chest and sat very straight on the back of Brimstone. Pom was always very brave while the danger was yet afar off. He was also very proud of the fact that he was born in "Ol' Kentuck."

By this time all of the little band of trappers had gathered on the top of the ridge, and were scanning the country beyond with eager eyes. Nearly all of them had hunted and trapped in this region before, and the eyes of these searched for familiar landmarks.

"It's th' Platte, sartain sure," cried one. "An th' last time I war har we camped right down thar

in that bunch of cottonwoods an' willers near th' river. I'd know th' spot anywhar, 'cause 'twar har them cuss'd Blackfeet killed my partner, Big Frank Williams. 'Most on you knowed Frank," and he turned to the trappers. "But I got th' Injun what got him. We buried him under that big cottonwood that stands lone-like tew th' right of th' bunch. We war with Jim Bridger then an' Kit Carson; an' when Kit saw Frank all muterlated by them red devils his lips came tewgether an' he walked straight tew Bridger an' asks tew be allowed tew go after them Injuns; an' Bridger told him tew go an' take as many trappers with him as he wanted. Kit asked for volunteers, an' every last one on us volunteered; but Kit picked out ten on us, an' we got after them devils as fast as our horses could take us. Th' next day 'bout dusk we came tew whar th' Injuns war camped in a lettle valley whar thar war plenty of grass an' water an' trees—thirty buck warriors, all in their war paint, a-gettin' ready for th' scalp-dance, tew cel'brate th' takin' of a white man's scalp. Reckon they didn't know Kit Carson was with us, or they wouldn't have ben so careless-like an' dead sartain they war safe from all pursuit, leastwise they had no sentries out an' we crept up close as we dared an' waited for th' cel'bratin' tew begin.

"In 'bout an hour they was ready an' proper excited; an' when a big buck jumps up an' begins prancin' 'round, an' swingin' his scalper in one

hand an' a scalp in th' other that I knowed by its long yeller-like ha'r, I couldn't hold my dander longer, for I knowed he was th' Injun I wanted, an' I pulled th' trigger, an' th' Injun whirled round an' went over backwards into th' fire.

"'Give it tew 'em, boys!' yelled Kit, 'bout tew seconds after I shot, jest when every Injun had jumped to his feet an' showed plain in th' firelight; an' ten more rifles cracked, an' ten more Injuns went down, an' th' rest on 'em, screechin' like devils, legged it for th' rocks, not stoppin' even tew git their weapons nor hosses, with us a-yellin' after 'em.

"We got thirty good hosses, an' eleven dead Injuns, an' larnt them Blackfeet a lesson; an' I had th' saterfaction of puttin' Frank's scalp back on his head, whar it belonged, an' burying it 'long with him. Thar ain't a man in all th' west I'd ruther have with me than Kit Carson, when it comes tew Injun fittin'. He always seems tew know jest what tew do at jest th' right moment, an' does it; an' once on th' trail he'll never give up 'til he gits what he's after. Yes, it war right under that tree whar we buried Big Frank," and the trapper pointed to the lone cottonwood, "an' I reckon my mark is on it yit."

The camp that night was made in the "bunch" of cottonwoods, not without a shiver or two on the part of Rex and Dill as they thought of the trapper's story and the lonely grave under the cottonwood tree.

Before it became too dark to see the two boys visited the grave with the trapper, and stood with uncovered heads near the little mound of grass. This was what they read rudely cut in the bark of the tree by the trapper's knife:

FRANK WILLIAMS
KILLED BI INJUNS
SEPT 10 1831
HE ALWAYS FIT ONEST

CHAPTER VII

THE GREAT BUFFALO HUNT

LONG before sunrise the next morning Rex and Dill were up getting ready for the great buffalo hunt. Neither of the boys had ever shot a buffalo; but both had read and heard innumerable stories of the wild thrilling excitement felt, when the hunter on his horse dashed into the midst of a herd of buffalos, rushing wild with fright over the plains, like a great tidal wave of bellowing horns and hoofs and huge bounding bodies; and to hunt buffalos on horseback had long been one of their greatest ambitions, and now that it was to be gratified two happier boys could not have been found anywhere. Both lads had bought buffalo ponies, that is, horses trained in buffalo hunting, and as each was a good shot with rifle or pistol, they felt as if they certainly ought to be able to kill at least one buffalo apiece out of so many, for, to the joy of all, the morning found the valley a mile from where they were encamped still covered with a multitude of grazing buffalos.

"Hadn't we better take our rifles, too?" and Rex turned a pair of inquiring eyes to Ham, who was superintending their preparations. "A pistol looks

like a small thing with which to kill so big an animal."

"No," Ham answered. "Th' guns would be in your way, an' th' pistol will kill jest as quick as th' rifle, if th' ball hits th' right spot. Now be sure an' aim jest a leetle ahind th' fore leg, an' don't fire until you're abreast an' so close you could lay your hand on th' buffalo's back— Then look out for horns! or th' first thing you know you an' your hoss will be up in th' air, th' hoss with horn holes in his belly big enough to run an arm in, an' th' buffalo ready to horn you up th' moment you hit th' ground."

Bridles, saddles, weapons, everything that was to be used in the hunt were carefully examined and all the weak places made strong; for buffalo hunting on horseback was no child's play, and a broken strap or a loose cinch might mean death on the sharp horns of an enraged buffalo bull.

Captain Tom selected five men, all of them experienced buffalo hunters, to take part in the hunt. The remaining trappers were left to guard the camp, with strict injunctions to keep a constant look out for Indians. They were now in a region frequented by the dreaded Blackfeet, where eternal vigilance alone could assure them safety; and Captain Tom wisely considered an ounce of precautions better than ten pounds of fight.

By the time the sun was half an hour high all were ready for the hunt. Captain Tom sat on the

back of Don Lucifer, with the five trappers and Rex and Dill, mounted on their horses, by his side. In the holsters of each rider were two large double-barreled pistols. These were the only guns the hunters took with them; for, as Ham said, there was no need of lugging a heavy rifle in a buffalo hunt, where the horse is ridden at full gallop within a few feet of the running buffalo, when the pistol is quite powerful enough to kill at such close range. Behind them sat Pom on the back of Brimstone, an old double-barreled shotgun loaded with buckshot that somehow had come into his possession, held across the saddle in front of him. Pom that morning had had a close view of a huge buffalo bull; and, after that sight, nothing could induce him to depend on the pistol in the coming hunt. There was an anxious, yet determined look on his fat black face; and he kept glancing down at the gun across his saddle-bow, as if he needed the constant assurance of its presence to bolster up his courage.

The buffalos covered a widening of the valley a mile or more to the north of them, and about midway between the buffalos and the hunters was a low ridge of rocks extending half-way across the valley.

Captain Tom's plan was to ride up behind this ridge, so as to be out of sight of the buffalos; and then from its top to sally down on the herd. At the order, charge, each hunter was to ride as fast as he could make his horse go straight for the herd, selecting the buffalo he wished to kill as he rode

and, dashing close up to its side, shoot it with his pistol.

"Advance!" called Captain Tom, when all were ready, and the little cavalcade of hunters started on the trot for the ridge.

"Look out, nigger, or one of them bulls'll let daylight through that black hide of yourn!" yelled one of the trappers who had been left behind to Pom.

"I heard a black crow croakin' from a dead tree this mornin', an' that means thar'll be a dead nigger afore night," warned another.

"If that old blunderbus fails tew bring down yer bull, nig, jest turn Brimstone's stern tew th' buffalo, an' tickle his ribs," laughed a third.

Pom and Brimstone's buffalo hunt had been the joke of the camp, and the occasion of much good-natured raillery on the part of the trappers, all of which the negro bore with unfailing good-humor; and now that he was actually starting on the hunt, each felt that the climax of the joke was about reached and that somehow something very funny would be sure to happen to Pom and Brimstone before the day's hunt was over—and, as usual, Pom and Brimstone did not disappoint them.

When our hunters reached the top of the ridge the nearest buffalos were a hundred rods away, too far for them to take any special notice of the men on horseback.

"Ride slowly down toward the buffalos until they

take fright, then all charge," was Captain Tom's brief command, as he headed Don Lucifer toward the buffalos and rode slowly down the ridge, the trappers spreading out to right and left of him as they neared the herd.

Pom rode directly behind Rex and Dill, keeping Brimstone's nose almost in contact with their horses' tails, his eyes growing larger and rounder and his grip on the old shotgun tighter the nearer he came to the buffalos.

"Massah Rex, Massah Dill," there was the faintest perceptible tremble in Pom's voice, "if 'bout a million ob dem buffafeller bulls comes a-tearin' aftah Brimstone, like dey's gwine to punch his ol' yeller ep-pie-der-muss full ob holes, what's dis niggah done gwine to do to sabe Brimstone? I's only got two loads in dis ol' gun, an' dar am 'bout sebenteen hundred million bufferfellers. I's done took a pow'ful likin' to Brimstone, an' I done want no ol' buffafeller bull's ho'ns a-pokin' 'round in his a-nat-tom-in-a."

"Just follow Jim's advice," laughed Rex, "and turn Brimstone's stern to the buffalos."

"Or—"

But before Dill could add his wise counsel, a number of old bulls in the outskirts of the herd nearest to the hunters, that had been eyeing their advance uneasily for a minute or two, suddenly lifted their heads, wheeled about, and, with their short tails held stiffly erect, galloped off as fast as

they could go; and the next instant the alarm was spreading through the entire herd.

"Charge!" shouted Captain Tom, as he struck Don Lucifer with his whip, and rushed after the now stampeding buffalos.

Almost in an instant the great herd was in motion.

Never before in all their young lives had Rex and Dill been as excited as they now were—and no wonder! It was a tremendous sight, as if the very bed of the valley itself had been suddenly endowed with life, and with a million hoofs beating the hard ground was thundering off. All the buffalos headed in one direction—away from the hunters—and rushed in one enormous mass straight onward, bulls bellowing, cows bawling, horns rattling against horns, great clouds of dust rolling upward like smoke, the very ground itself rumbling and quaking under that enormous weight of moving life, as if in the throes of an earthquake.

This much Rex and Dill saw and heard, but indistinctly comprehended in their excitement, as their fleet ponies bore them toward the herd; and then they were in the midst of the buffalos, their eyes blinded and their nostrils filled with dust, and their ears deafened by the bellowings and the bawlings, the clankings of horns against horns and the thunders of thousands of hard hoofs hitting the hard ground at the same moment. Here, in the midst of this wild confusion, they lost track of

each other, of everybody and everything, save the one animal each had singled out to be his victim.

Rex saw a powerful bull forging ahead at a tremendous speed for so bulky an animal, and the sight at once fired his blood. He forgot the warnings of Hammer Jones, of Captain Tom, to leave the bulls alone and shoot the young cows. He must kill that monster, the biggest bull in sight; and, with a yell, started his pony after him.

The buffalo is not built for speed like the deer; but it is astonishing sometimes to see how fast he will get over the ground for a few miles; and Rex, notwithstanding his pony was an exceptionally speedy little animal, at first did not appear to be able to gain an inch on the bull. For a mile or two they ran thus, the pony following close in the track of the buffalo, but unable to overtake the bull. Then they passed over a ridge and came to where the ground was rougher. Here the bull did not seem to be able to make as good headway or else he was becoming tired, for the plucky little horse of Rex now began to gain slowly, and in the course of the next mile brought his rider up close to the bull's panting side.

What a monster he now looked to the boy, with his lion-like front of shaggy mane and dangling beard, with his huge head and shoulders bounding up and down as he sped over the rough ground, the red tongue hanging from his open mouth, the large blood-shot eyes rolling wildly backward at his

pursuer, and his breath coming and going in great puffs that sent the foam flying from his jowls!

Rex was now so close that he might almost have laid his hand upon the great heaving back; and he knew that the time for action had come, and drew his pistol from its holster; but, for a moment, his hand and arm trembled so that he could not take aim. Then his nerves steadied and, taking quick aim, he fired.

The bull gave a tremendous convulsive bound, half turned to charge, and crashed to the ground, his horns plowing up the dirt. The ball from Rex's pistol had pierced his heart.

Rex stopped his horse, and took off his hat, and swung it around his head, and stood up in his stirrups, and yelled. It was his first buffalo, and he had killed it with his first ball! And then, suddenly, the yell died in his throat, the hat dropped from his hand, and his eyes stared straight across the body of the dead bull toward a little rise of ground not twenty-five rods away, over the brow of which a tall Indian, running at full speed, had suddenly appeared, with a huge buffalo bull that his arrow had wounded not two rods behind him. The bull was gaining at every bound. In a few minutes at most he would overtake the Indian; and then, the horns already red, doubtless with the blood of the warrior's horse, would be redder still.

Rex shuddered at the sight, then suddenly his

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REX HAD EYES ONLY FOR THE INDIAN.

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lips tightened, and, shouting to attract the attention of the Indian, he struck his horse with his whip and dashed straight toward the advancing Indian and buffalo.

The Indian heard the shout, saw the white boy rushing to his rescue, and the sight seemed to put redoubled speed into his flying legs.

Rex had no thought of his own peril. He thought only of saving the life of the Indian; and to do this he knew that he must get to the Indian before the bull did, and if possible, get him on the back of his horse in time to carry both out of the way of the sharp horns.

The bull was wild with rage and pain. The blood flew from his open mouth and nostrils and dripped from his dangling tongue at every breath. His great eyes rolled with agony and fury. All this, added to his enormous lion-like front, made a most terrifying spectacle.

But, fortunately, Rex had eyes only for the Indian. He saw the buffalo and noted the horrors of his appearance, but indistinctly. His every nerve was strained to guide his horse so as to meet the Indian at exactly the right moment in exactly the right way. Failure to do this might mean death to both.

On sped the horse and on came the Indian and the buffalo.

The bull was not ten feet behind, when Rex, slacking his speed just a little, dashed in front of

the Indian and reached downward as he passed to grip him by the hand and to help swing him up on the back of his horse. The Indian understood his object; and, with a mighty bound, just as Rex was passing, caught his hand, gripped the back of the saddle, and swung himself up behind on the back of the horse—and the next instant horse and riders felt as if an earthquake had struck them, as they were lifted upward and hurled through the air.

Rex struck the ground a rod away from where he started, but the soft grass broke his fall and he leaped to his feet unhurt. The Indian was already on his feet, his knife, the only weapon he had with him, in his hand. The horse was struggling on the grass in the agonies of death, the head of the great bull, the horns and mane covered with blood, swaying above him; and, even as the horrified boy looked, the monster staggered, swayed from side to side for an instant, and fell dead by the side of the dead horse.

At last the Indian's arrow had done its fatal work.

For a minute Rex and the Indian stood motionless, staring at the dead buffalo and the dead horse. Then the Indian slipped his knife back into its sheath and turned and walked slowly toward Rex.

He was unusually tall, splendidly proportioned and young, only a few years older than was Rex himself. In his wild race for life he had thrown away every article of clothing, except his deerskin

leggings and his beaded moccasins. These were new and richly ornamented. Three eagle feathers were firmly fastened in his black hair; and around the wrist of his right arm was a broad band of silver. An ornamented belt around his waist supported his leggings and held his sheathed knife.

With a slow stately step, every motion showing the lithe gracefulness of his muscular body and limbs, the young Indian approached Rex. When within four or five feet of the white boy, he stopped, his countenance grave, but his dark eyes glowing with the warmth of his feelings. His lips parted to speak; but, before a sound could come from between them, over the rise of ground from behind which the Indian and the buffalo had come, with a great clatter of hoofs, dashed a dozen Indian warriors, their plumes and blankets streaming out behind them, their spear heads glistening in the bright sunlight, their weapons ready in their hands. Without slackening the speed of their ponies in the least they rushed, like a whirlwind, straight to where Rex and the young Indian stood; and, in an instant, had formed a circle around the boy and the Indian, bringing their ponies to a halt with a suddenness that almost threw them back upon their haunches. And there they sat, like bronze equestrian statues, their weapons ready in their hands, their eyes glittering with vindictive hatred, fixed on Rex.

Rex was frightened, terribly frightened, by this sudden coming of the armed Indian warriors; for

even his untrained eyes had sufficient skill in the customs of the Indians to tell him that he was surrounded by the dreaded Blackfeet, the implacable foes of the white trapper. He knew that capture by these Indians meant torture and death, unless rescued.

The young Indian—he was a chief, that was apparent from his actions and the eagle feathers in his hair—raised the palm of his right hand and held it protectingly over Rex.

"Let my white brother have no fear," he said in a low musical voice. "White Otter's shield is before him." Then he turned to the circling warriors, and, raising his voice, addressed them in his native language.

Rex knew from his gestures and actions, he frequently pointed to where the dead horse and the dead buffalo bull lay, that he was telling them the story of his rescue; and, to his intense satisfaction, at his words, he saw the fierce light fade from the eyes of the surrounding Indians and the foreboding gloom of their sullen faces lighten. For, perhaps, five minutes the young chief spoke, then he stepped back a couple of paces from Rex, held up his right arm, and, at a gesture, the warriors, one by one, rode slowly between him and Rex each pausing an instant to look closely on the broad band of silver encircling the upraised arm and to scrutinize sharply the face of the white boy as he passed. When the last warrior had thus passed, they

gathered together in a compact band, struck their horses with their whips, and galloped off over the brow of the ridge whence they had come, leaving Rex again alone with the young chief.

White Otter lowered his arm, slipped the broad band of silver off over his hand, and, again coming close to Rex, gently took his right hand and pushed the silver band over it onto his wrist.

"Let my white brother listen," he said, still holding the right hand of Rex in his. "Your race and my race are enemies. The hatchet can never be buried long between them. The Great Spirit gave the Indian this country. He gave him the buffalo, the deer, the broad plains and the high mountains. His camp-fires have burned here for many generations. The graves of his ancestors are here. It is his home. The paleface come and kill our buffalo and deer. They trap our beaver. They roam over our plains and through our mountains, driving the deer and the buffalos from our hunting-grounds. They do not come at our invitation. We do not want them; but, when we tell them to go, they refuse. When we attempt to make them go, they fight. We are not children. We are warriors and men. We love our country; and, like men and warriors, we will fight for our country. No, between the whiteman and the Indian there can be no peace, so long as the whiteman comes into our country and refuses to go when the Indian tells him to go. But you have saved the life of White Otter. White

Otter will not war with you. You are his brother. See, he has placed his medicine band upon your arm," and the chief's eyes rested on the band of silver he had placed around the wrist of Rex. "It is good medicine. It will protect you in battle. The arrows and the bullets of your enemies will pass you by. It will tell the friends of White Otter that you are his brother, and keep their knives and arrows from doing you harm. Always wear it. It is the gift of White Otter to his white brother. Now we must part, or the white hunters will find White Otter and slay him. Yonder is the camp of my brother," and the young chief pointed in the direction opposite to that in which the Indian warriors had disappeared. "White Otter's memory is as long as his life. He will never forget the wild bull and the swift horse and his white brother who saved his life," and, without waiting for a word in reply from Rex, he dropped his hand and walked swiftly away; and, in a couple of minutes, had passed from sight over the ridge of ground.

Rex, during all these exciting and dramatic moments, had stood motionless and silent—what could he do or say?—and not until the young chief had passed from sight did he really awake from his trancelike condition of mind and body. Then the first thing he did was to hurry to his horse. The gallant little animal was dead; and by his side lay the dead buffalo bull. Rex stood up and looked hastily around, hoping to see some of his friends.

He found himself standing in a little cup-like valley, perhaps a mile across; and, so far as he could see, he was the only living thing in it. He listened. He could not hear a sound of the hunt. In the excitement of the chase he had evidently wandered far from the hunters and the herd of buffalos. Now he must get back to his friends as soon as possible.

With a sad heart he turned to his dead horse, for he had come to think a great deal of the sturdy little pony that had carried him for so many weary miles, and with swift hands took the bridle and the saddle from the body. Then he slung the saddle and bridle over his shoulder and started for camp, his mind full of the strange adventure he had just experienced. He did not have the least idea himself where the camp was; but followed the direction pointed out by the young Indian chief; and, at the end of an hour's walk, came to the top of a ridge from which, to his inexpressible delight, he could see the little grove of cottonwoods along the river bank and the white tents of the camp.

Dill, when that furious dash after the buffalos began, was greatly excited. What boy would not have been? But, by the time his pony had brought him through the cloud of dust that followed close after the fleeing herd, he had his nerves under pretty good control. When he broke into the herd, he found that his trained pony had already selected a young cow, and, wiser or not as venturesome as Rex, he was satisfied. The cow did not prove to be

very speedy, and in less than ten minutes his horse had brought him alongside of her.

Dill drew one of his pistols from its holster; and, just at the moment the motion of the cow's leg exposed the bare spot of skin just back of the shoulder, he took quick aim and fired. But, in the excitement of the moment, he missed the fatal spot and broke the cow's leg, and it took all of his four bullets to kill her.

Now Dill's excitement broke loose; and he shouted and yelled and swung his hat. Then he leaped off his horse, and having tied him to the dead buffalo's horns, examined his prize. She was fat and young.

"Just right for killing," soliloquized the proud and happy boy. "I wonder if Rex has done as well," and he straightened up and looked around. A hundred rods to his right Hammer Jones was just tying his horse to the horns of a dead cow. A little farther on Captain Tom was racing alongside of a buffalo; and, even as Dill looked, he saw him raise his arm and the smoke leap from the muzzle of his pistol and the cow tumble to the ground. But no where could he see a sign of Rex. He ran and jumped on the back of his horse, so as to widen his range of vision. Still no where could he see Rex. He was about to gallop to a near-by ridge, to see if he could discover Rex from its summit, when he saw the negro boy, Pom, hurrying toward him on the back of his old yellow mule, Brimstone; and

the scene that now followed soon drove all thought of Rex out of his head for the time being.

Pom was lashing Brimstone with his whip and yelling at him at the top of his voice. Evidently at the critical moment Pom's courage had failed him; and now, when he knew that it would be impossible to overtake the herd, he wanted to appear to be most anxious to do so. Suddenly up from the grass directly in front of Brimstone, jumped a young buffalo calf. Pom saw him. Here was his opportunity to distinguish himself, and to capture his buffalo alive. With a yell and a jerk he brought Brimstone to a halt, slipped off his back and quickly tied him to a small bush.

The calf had run only a few rods, and now stood looking curiously at Pom and Brimstone.

The negro boy had heard the trappers say, that, if you would hold your hands over the eyes of a buffalo calf and breathe a few strong breaths into his nostrils, the little animal would follow you anywhere; and at this important moment Pom remembered this bit of wisdom, and determined to act on it. But first he must catch the calf. However, Pom had caught many common calves, big ones, and he did not fancy that this little buffalo calf would give him much trouble, so he started valiantly toward him.

"So-bossy! So-bossy!" Pom called soothingly, as he advanced, having laid down his gun to show his peaceable intentions.

The calf stretched out his nose toward him, sniffed the air and stood still.

"So-bossy! Come bossy! Dis niggah ain't gwine to hurt yo'," he continued to call, as he slowly drew nearer to the calf. "So-bossy! Come bossy! Come to yo' lil honey boy!"

And the calf came—on the jump, his head lowered.

"Golly!" and Pom turned and started on the run for Brimstone; but, before he had taken two steps, the head of the calf landed, and down he went sprawling on his fat belly.

Pom yelled and attempted to scramble to his feet; but, just as he got in the best position, the calf landed again, and again Pom went down. This time his yell was louder. For a minute Pom lay still, then he cautiously began to rise, and had just got onto his feet when the calf's head struck and toppled him over once more. Pom now lay still and yelled for help. The buffalo calf stood about a rod from where he lay, just far enough to give him a good start, and watched him closely. He was not going to let that big black round thing that yelled so curiously get away from him.

During these little preliminaries Dill had galloped up to within a few rods of where this unique contest was taking place, and now sat on his horse watching Pom and the buffalo calf and laughing so that he could scarcely keep his seat in his saddle. Hammer Jones and a couple of the other trappers had

also joined the audience, while Captain Tom was hurrying thither as fast as his horse could take him. So Pom was not to lack witnesses in his efforts to distinguish himself.

For two minutes Pom did not move a muscle, except the muscles of his tongue and lungs, then he began very cautiously to raise his head. He caught sight of Hammer Jones.

"Shoot de debbel! Shoot de little hunchback debbel!" he yelled. "Shoot him, fo' he done br'ak ebbery bone in mah skeleton."

"Shucks, Pom," laughed Ham, "you don't want to shoot that pretty leetle feller. Jest catch him an' breathe in his nostrils, an' he'll foller you like a leetle lamb."

"Breve in his nostrils! Breve in dat little debble's nostrils! Fo' de lub ob hebben, shoot him Massah Ham—O-O—Ouch!"

In the eagerness of his appeal Pom had half risen to his feet. That was all the buffalo calf needed, and, with a thud that sounded like a football hitting the side of a barn, the hairy head struck and Pom was sent sprawling on the grass, with all the breath knocked out of his body for the moment.

"Grab him 'round th' neck, when he bunts!" yelled one of the delighted trappers.

"Catch him by th' hind leg an' throw him an' set on him," advised another.

"Get your gun and shoot him," called Captain Tom, who had just ridden up.

"Massah Tom! Massah Captain Tom!" screamed the now thoroughly terrified negro boy, lying flat on his belly and hardly daring to raise his head an inch. "Fo' de lub ob de good Lo'd kill dat little black debble, fo' he done knocks mah spinal meningetus t'ro' mah essopagus. I's most kilt now," and his voice ended in a loud and prolonged wail.

This was too much for one of the trappers and he tumbled off his horse and rolled on the grass and yelled and guffawed like a lunatic. Even Captain Tom had hard work to keep in his saddle. Surely Pom was distinguishing himself in a most unusual manner.

All this noise and motion attracted the attention of the buffalo calf, and, for a moment, drew his eyes away from his victim. He even turned and trotted away for a rod or two.

"Quick! Now is your chance," yelled Dill. "Get your gun and shoot him. He's running away."

"Hurry!" shouted Ham, "an' catch him, or he'll git away."

"You've got him runnin' now, nig. After him!" cried Captain Tom.

Thus urged, Pom cautiously raised his head, saw that his enemy had moved off a couple of rods or more and was standing with his back toward him; and, doubtless thinking that he was secure now, a portion of his courage came back, and, jumping to his feet, he yelled: "I's done gwine to fix yo' now,

yo' little black debbel," and started on the run for the spot where he had laid his double-barreled shotgun.

But the buffalo calf was still on his job; and, whirling swiftly about, he started for Pom, like a live battering-ram.

Pom saw him coming, and let out a yell that nearly split his throat, and made his legs go, as if he surely thought the devil were after him. He reached the spot where he had left his gun; but, just at the critical instant when he bent over to grab it up from the ground, the calf's head arrived, and Pom departed with a suddenness that landed him headfirst on the grass ten feet away, the gun tightly gripped in one of his clenched hands.

How Captain Tom and the trappers and Dill did laugh! They knew that Pom was in no real danger; but the looks on his fat face and the antics of his fat body, when the calf's head struck him, were so comical, that, even if they had known that he was in instant peril of his life they could not have helped laughing.

Pom, however, did not laugh—he yelled, with all the strength of his lungs. Then he felt the gun in his hand, which fortunately had not been damaged nor discharged by its rough usage, and again some of his courage came back, and once more he cautiously raised his head to get a sight of his enemy.

The buffalo calf had backed off a couple of rods and again had turned his head to look curiously at

the antics of the wildly hilarious trappers, who were acting more like crazy men than veterans of the plains.

Pom slowly got up on his knees, a look of grim determination on his fat face and the fires of a desperate resolve in his eyes. He had his beloved gun in his hand, and now he would kill the calf and be revenged for all the indignities the little animal had butted upon him. Still he would not venture to shoot until he could do so from the safe vantage of Brimstone's back; and, suddenly jumping to his feet, he made a rush for the mule. Fortunately Brimstone was now only about ten feet away, and Pom reached his side and scrambled up on his back before the calf could get to him.

The moment Pom was in his saddle, all his courage and assurance returned, while his wrath against the buffalo calf flamed into a fervent heat.

"Yo'—yo' scan'lous, no-'count, low-down, good-fo'-nothin', hunchbacked skinful ob buttin' obnickity, yo'—yo'll butt dis niggah all ober de plains, will yo'? Now I's gwine to fix yo', so yo' won't do no mo' buttin'," and Pom raised his shotgun to his shoulder, took aim at the calf that now stood some two rods away eying him wonderingly, and, in his excitement, pulled both triggers.

The two barrels of the old gun went off with a tremendous bang—so did Pom, off the back of the mule, fortunately landing on his head, while the smoking gun flew from his outspread hands and

struck the ground a half-dozen yards or more away from Pom's landing-place.

The buffalo calf, with a frightened bleat, whirled about, and, with its little short tail held stiffly erect, galloped off in the direction taken by the herd, unharmed by Pom's gun.

"Let him go," laughed Captain Tom, when one of the trappers made a motion to raise his rifle to shoot the calf. "He deserves his freedom for the fun he has given us." And the calf was allowed to gallop off unharmed.

Pom lay on the ground for a moment, then he slowly got on his feet and began gingerly feeling of the different parts of his body, as if he expected to find every bone broken, the expression on his fat black face seeming to indicate that he really did not know yet whether he was dead or alive, but was just beginning to have suspicions that he might still be in the land of the living. Presently a look of relief swept over his countenance and he straightened up.

"Golly!" he cried, his delight shining all over his rotund face. "Dis niggah's bones sart'nly am made ob mighty good subsistunces. I done thought ebbery one ob dem cracked fo' sho'. Now," and he looked proudly around, just as Dill and his trapper friends galloped up, "whar am dat dead buffafeller calf?"

"Gone too find his ma," grinned Hammer Jones. "You sartainly did scare him, Pom."

"Scare!" and Pom's eyes widened until they looked like white marbles. "I done blowed a hole t'ro' him big 'nuf fo' Brimstone to walk t'ro'. I done seed his intestimals flyin' all ober 'fo'—'fo' I got off Brimstone."

"And they are still flying," chuckled Captain Tom. "There they go over the ridge," and he pointed to where the buffalo calf was just passing over the top of a ridge.

For a moment Pom stared at the running calf, as if he could not believe the evidence of his own eyes, then he glared at the gun lying on the ground.

"Den dat dar no-'count gun not kill dat dar buntin' buffafeller calf aftah he's done butted dis niggah all ober cr'ation?" he queried. "Jes' walloped me off mah mule an' nebber done hurted dat little black buntin' debbel!" and a look of unspeakable disgust swept swiftly over the black face. "I nebber wants to see dat no-'count gun no mo'," and, leaving the gun where it lay, Pom hastily mounted Brimstone and started back for camp, not even deigning to turn in his saddle in answer to the good-natured jeers and amusing suggestions of the trappers.

That night all feasted on buffalo steaks, and hot marrow fresh from the bones, and the choicest cuts from the hump-ribs, and the tongue, and the other buffalo tidbits, according to taste and fancy; and never had Rex and Dill enjoyed a meal as they did that one, cooked over their own camp-fires. Ham

showed them how to split the marrow bones with an ax, so that one side would come off like the lid of a box, exposing the long white roll of unbroken marrow, steaming hot and more delicious to their taste than anything they had ever eaten before.

After all had feasted to their stomachs' content, or, possibly, discontent, they gathered around the camp-fires; and there, for the first time, Rex related at length his adventures with the two buffalo bulls and the Indians and showed the broad band of silver White Otter had placed around his wrist. There were a number of rudely engraved figures on the bracelet, evidently meant to represent an otter, an eagle and a beaver. These looked as if they had been cut into the silver with a knife, probably in the hands of its Indian owner.

Rex had hardly finished his narrative—the trappers were still examining the bracelet and commenting on his adventure, when all were startled by a distant loud halloo; and they saw, on the top of a near-by hill, standing out distinctly in the red light of early evening, an unarmed Indian sitting statuesque on his horse and holding aloft a piece of white buckskin in token of the peacefulness of his mission. By the side of the Indian's horse stood another horse, with a coat as white as the snow when it first touches the ground and a beautiful long mane and tail. Even from where they stood the boys could see that this was one of the most splendidly formed horses they had ever seen. The horse was

riderless, but was held by a buckskin rope in the hands of the Indian on horseback.

Captain Tom at once laid down his rifle, walked a couple of rods toward the Indian, and made signs for him to advance.

The Indian now rode slowly toward the camp, leading the white horse.

"Oh, what a beautiful horse!" exclaimed Rex as the Indian drew near. "I'd give 'most anything to own such a horse as that. Just see what a splendid chest and neck and head and limbs he has. I did not suppose Indians ever owned such fine horses."

"A Blackfoot, as sure as I am a sinner," declared Ham, who stood by the side of Rex and Dill. "What on earth can he want with us, unless it's our scalps! Say, but it's a down right sin for an Ingine tew have a hoss like that," and his admiring eyes rested on the beautiful white horse the Indian was leading.

In the meantime the Indian had reached the spot where Captain Tom stood awaiting him. For some five minutes the two talked together, then the Indian passed the rope that held the white horse to Captain Tom, sat up straight in his saddle and for a full minute calmly surveyed the staring trappers, turned his horse around and rode slowly away, not deigning to give one backward glance.

"See," cried Dill, "he has left the white horse with Captain Tom! I wonder if he has bought him!"

"I hope so," Rex answered; "because then maybe

Captain Tom would let me ride him sometimes. It must be great to feel such a horse under one."

Captain Tom, with a broad grin on his face and leading the white horse, approached the spot where Rex and Dill stood.

"From White Otter to his white brother, who saved him from the horns of the mad bull, and lost his own horse in doing it," he said, placing the lead-rope of the white horse into the hand of Rex. "Leastwise that's what I made out of the lingo of the chief. And a right royal gift I call it," and Captain Tom's eyes rested admiringly on the horse.

"For me!" Rex cried, his astonishment and delight almost overpowering him. "This beautiful horse for me!" and, in the exuberance of his joy, he threw both arms around the glossy neck of the animal.

The horse neighed softly and rubbed his nose gently against Rex, as if he were trying to make him understand that he was glad the boy was to be his master.

"Did the Indian tell you what his name was?" inquired the delighted boy, his arms still around the white neck.

"White Cloud, if I understood the chief aright," replied Captain Tom. "Seems to fit good, too; for I fancy he'll look 'bout like a cloud of white soaring just above the ground, when he's running. You ain't wanting to sell the animal? I—"

"Sell him! Sell White Cloud! No, sir; NO,"

and the arms of Rex hugged the glossy neck tighter than ever. "I—I would not sell White Cloud for all the money in the world. Oh, but isn't he a little beauty! I must, I must have a little ride on him to-night. Here, you hold him, Dill, while I get the saddle and the bridle," and the happy boy, handing the rope to Dill, ran to where his saddle and bridle lay, and, hurrying back, soon had them on the horse, and, in another moment was astride the beautiful animal.

For fifteen minutes or more Rex galloped and trotted and raced and ran White Cloud, circling about on the little plain in front of the cottonwoods; and, when he trotted back into camp and dismounted, he was satisfied that there was not another as speedy nor as beautiful nor as easy a riding horse in all America as White Cloud, the gift of his Indian brother, the young Blackfoot chief, White Otter.

That night the camp was double-guarded; for now they were in the Blackfeet country, and their next encounter with these dreaded Indians might not end as favorably as had the adventure of Rex.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE STAMPEDE

OUR friends were now in the country of the beaver; but, before beginning trapping operations, it was decided to spend three or four days in their present camp, curing and drying the meat of the buffalos they had already killed and the others that they expected to kill. They might not have another opportunity to get buffalo meat, since the buffalo was not apt to be found, at least not in great numbers, in the mountainous regions where they expected their trapping would take them; and Captain Tom believed in making hay while the sun shone.

Accordingly, the next day, Captain Tom, with three of the trappers, continued the buffalo hunt, while the others, under the charge of Hammer Jones, built scaffolds, cut up the meat of the buffalos already killed into narrow strips and hung it on poles laid across the scaffolds. Then fires were kindled underneath the suspended meat; and thus the narrow strips were dried and smoked until they were sufficiently cured to preserve them almost indefinitely, and could be packed on their mules and taken with them, to be eaten when fresh meat could not be obtained.

Rex and Dill remained in camp to help with the meat jerking; and very hard and hot and smoky work they found it; but the antics of Pom and the doings of the grizzly bear cub, Buster, who had become as tame as a dog and a hundred times more mischievous, kept them all good-natured, and the time passed very rapidly.

By the evening of the third day they had sufficient buffalo meat jerked, and it was decided to break camp the next morning and travel up the Platte until they came to the mouth of the Sweetwater, which Captain Tom calculated was about a two days' journey from where they were.

They had seen nothing more of White Otter and his band of Indians. Indeed, Captain Tom knew Indian nature well enough to know that they had little to fear from this band, since the rescue of their chief by Rex; but there might be other parties of Blackfeet, who would like nothing better than to steal every horse and mule they had, except to get the scalps of their owners, and, consequently the trappers had not dared to relax their vigilance in the least. Each night, as soon as it became dark, every horse and mule was picketed within a few feet of where the trappers were to sleep and then short-hobbled, so that in case of an attempted stampede by the Indians the animals could not be driven away, even if they should break loose from their pickets. Rex would not run even this slight risk with White Cloud, and drove the picket that held him inside the

tent, within a foot of the spot where his head rested when he slept. Then he tied the pommel of his saddle by a short deerskin thong to the picket; and, as he used his saddle for a pillow, the picket could not be pulled out of the ground without disturbing his head sufficiently to awaken him. In addition to these precautions four men were always on guard during the dark hours of the night.

Of course Rex and Dill had to do their share of this guard-duty; and, on this last night in the camp in the cottonwoods, it so happened that both boys went on duty for the last three hours of the watch, or from about two o'clock in the morning until daylight—the most dangerous period of the entire watch, for Indians will seldom make an attack during the darkness of the night, but will wait until the early light of morning begins to appear. Captain Tom and Hammer Jones were their comrades of the guard.

The grove of cottonwoods was small, only a little circular clump of trees, perhaps five rods across, growing on the bank of the Platte, and surrounded on all sides by an open prairie. The four guards were so placed around this little grove that their eyes could command the entire surrounding country, and it would take a cunning Indian indeed who could creep up unseen by their watchful eyes. They did not expose themselves, but each carefully concealed himself in the dark shadows of a tree where he could watch without being seen.

"Now, boys," Captain Tom said, when the two lads stood ready to go on guard, "be sure and keep your eyes wide open all the time. It's going to be right dark just afore daylight, and that's the time to look out for the Blackfeet. Don't hesitate an instant to shoot at anything that looks wrong coming toward camp. Ham and I will take the two ends, and you boys can watch the sides. Come on," and they started to the relief of the old guard.

Dill was stationed on the river side of the grove, and Rex on the side facing the plains.

"Seen anything suspicious?" Captain Tom asked of each guard as he was relieved.

"Nothin'," was the answer of each, until they came to the trapper whose place Rex was to take.

"Thar's bin half a dozen coyotes a-sticken their heads over th' top of yonder ridge," this man answered, pointing to a low ridge that showed dimly some twenty rods from where they stood. "But I reckon they 's all the real thing, leastwise I couldn't make nothin' else out of 'em. Thought I'd jest mention it."

Captain Tom stood for two or three minutes, his eyes fixed on the ridge. A couple of coyotes appeared on its top, and one of them squatted down on his haunches and began to howl. Captain Tom listened for a moment, and then smiled.

"I'd take my oath that that's the real critter," he said, as the unearthly gibberish of shrill sounds ended in a burst of imp-like laughter. "Not even

an Indian could make a noise like that, only that devil-beast. But keep your eyes on the ridge, because that's 'bout the likeliest place from which to make a stampede," he cautioned Rex, as he departed for his own station, leaving the boy alone.

Rex stood in the dark shadows of a thick-leaved cottonwood, close to its trunk. He could see the surrounding plain and the top of the ridge quite clearly, for the moon, now nearing the western horizon, still gave considerable light. But, in the course of an hour, the moon would be gone, and then there would be only the stars to lighten the scene.

For a long time Rex kept his eyes steadfastly on the top of that ridge. If that was where the Indians were most likely to come from, he did not wish to be caught napping. But the hours passed and the moon went down, and still nothing suspicious, not even a coyote, had Rex seen or heard. Another hour went by. It was now so dark that the boy could see nothing distinctly on the ridge top, strain his eyes as he might. Once or twice he thought he could distinguish the moving of a dark huddled cloud-like mass along the ridge summit, but the next moment it would melt into the surrounding darkness. Once also there came to him a muffled sound, like the very distant murmurs of the voices of men talking, but, when he listened intently, this, too, seemed to be a thing of his imagination.

At last the first light of early morning began to appear, and Rex breathed easier. Now he could

even see the shadowy outlines of the small trees that stood on the ridge top—"But," and, at the thought, Rex straightened up from the tree trunk against which he had been leaning with a sudden jerk, "how came the trees there! There had been none there the night before."

He rubbed his eyes and looked. Yes, there certainly were trees there now, standing a little higher than a man and huddled quite closely together. In the clearer light of the advancing morning he could see them quite distinctly.

What could it mean? How came they there!

How—how was that? Trees do not move—fall to the ground—gallop off on horseback!

"Indians! Indians!" and the startled boy threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired at the mass of mounted warriors that now burst forth from behind the discarded tree tops and poured down the side of the ridge, straight toward the spot where he stood.

"Indians! Indians!" yelled Captain Tom and Ham almost in the same breath, firing their rifles.

The next instant it sounded as if all the demons of pandemonium had broken loose, as, firing the few guns they had, yelling at the top of their voices and swinging their blankets around their heads, the hundred or more Indians swept, like a hurricane, down on the little grove of cottonwoods.

"The horses! Guard the horses and mules!" shouted Captain Tom. "It is only a stampede," and

he ran to where the animals were corralled in a little opening in the grove about two rods from the tents.

Almost on the instant the cry of "Indians! Indians!" and the rifle shots rang out, every trapper leaped to his feet, his rifle ready in his hands. There was no confusion, no panic. They knew exactly what that cry, followed by the shots and yells of the savages and the rapid thuds of their horses' hoofs, meant. They had often heard it before, and each one knew exactly what to do—get to the horses and mules as quickly as possible, so as to prevent any of them escaping, and then get in as many shots as they could at the Indians.

Rex, after he had shouted his warning and fired his gun, stood, for a moment, stock-still, his eyes fixed on that yelling charging horde of savages, his senses fascinated by the fearful sight and his blood curdling with the chill of those dreadful yells; then the thought of White Cloud's peril came and he leaped toward his tent. He was just in time to see a naked dripping body slip up out of the water of the river, and leap, knife in hand, toward the spot where White Cloud was plunging at the end of his picket-line. His own rifle was empty, and the Indian would get to White Cloud before he could possibly get to the Indian. All the trappers had rushed to where the horses and mules were picketed; and, in the confusion and excitement, not one of them saw the peril of White Cloud. The Indian had only to

cut the hobbles and the picket-line, spring on the horse's back and gallop off, safe from pursuit, for what horse could overtake White Cloud?

In the first glance Rex saw all this, and yelled at the top of his voice, and strained every muscle to reach White Cloud in time to save him from the Indian; but he was too late. With a yell of triumph the Indian bounded to the side of White Cloud, with one stroke his keen knife flashed through the hobbles, and he turned to cut the picket-line, when there came a savage growl from almost under his feet, and the next instant he felt the sharp teeth of some animal buried in the calf of his right leg.

The Indian yelled with pain and fright, glanced down, saw that it was a grizzly bear that had hold of him, and, with another yell of mortal terror, tore himself free from Buster's teeth, plunged down the bank, splashed into the river, and was gone. Doubtless the grizzly cub had looked much larger to his terrified eyes than he really was. A moment later Rex's arms were around the neck of White Cloud, and with voice and caress he was quieting the frightened animal.

During these moments the trappers had been having an exciting time with the horses and mules. Some of the terrified animals had broken loose from their pickets, but their hobbles prevented them from escaping; and all were plunging and kicking and struggling madly to be off, away from those yelling fiends with the great flapping wings.

Like a whirlwind the yelling Indians charged to within a few rods of the struggling animals, then turned and swept by; and, in less time than it has taken to describe these happenings, they had disappeared completely into the gloom of the still early morning.

The trappers had fired one volley, but without hitting an Indian so far as could be seen; and then had been obliged to give all their attention to the horses and mules. Buster, apparently, had carried off all the honors, he being the only one to draw the enemy's blood.

Not an animal had escaped, but one of the mules had broken his leg and had to be shot to put him out of his misery.

When Rex told his story of how narrowly White Cloud had missed being captured, Captain Tom looked sober.

"You'll have to keep a mighty close eye on that animal all through the Indian country, my boy," he said. "A Blackfoot or an Apache would go almost to hell to get a-hold of such a horse. Evidently this here stampede was planned mostly on purpose to give that Indian a chance to capture White Cloud. 'Twas a mighty cunning trick and daring for an Indian. Bully for Buster! You can fill his belly as full of buffalo steak as it will hold this morning. I reckon that's the kind of appreciation that he'll appreciate most."

There was no more sleeping that morning. As

quickly as possible breakfast was eaten—you may be sure Buster's steak was not forgotten—the mules were packed and the start for the Sweetwater was made. Captain Tom, now that he knew a large band of hostile Blackfeet was near, did not wish to linger in that locality a minute longer than was necessary. Three scouts were sent out in advance of the little party, and every precaution taken to guard against surprise or ambuscade. Thus they journeyed all day up the valley of the North Platte; and at night camped on the summit of a small hill in the midst of a wide plain, where it would be impossible for their cunning enemies to creep upon them unawares.

During the day they had seen many signs, which, to eyes as experienced as theirs, told that the Blackfeet were watching them closely. Sometimes a solitary Indian warrior would appear on a distant hilltop, sit for a moment motionless on his horse's back, his eyes scanning the little band of trappers; then he would wheel his horse and disappear behind the hill. Again the puffs of a distant signal-smoke would be seen rising upward through the clear air, to be answered, possibly, a few minutes later by another similar column of smoke miles away.

However, the night passed without any alarms. Doubtless the Indians were not in sufficiently large numbers to attack the trappers themselves, and, after their experience of the night before, they did not care to attempt another stampede, where there were so many watchful eyes behind so many long-

barreled rifles, and so were content to watch them from a distance and to warn other Indians of their coming.

The next day they saw thousands of buffalos, sometimes literally covering the valley of the Platte from ridge to ridge; but no one was allowed to kill any. Captain Tom was too anxious to get out of the region of the hostile Blackfeet to delay the train a moment to kill buffalo. They also saw antelope and deer and a couple of grizzly bears; but not a gun was fired at any of them. All day they marched as fast as the pack-mules could go, stopping only a half hour at noon; and a little before sundown, to the satisfaction of all, they reached the mouth of the Sweetwater and went into camp for the night.

Since early morning they had not seen a sign of an Indian, and it was the opinion of all that that particular band of Blackfeet had, at last, given up the chase; but there might be other bands near, so that they did not dare to relax their vigilance in the least.

"Better tie them kinks of wool tew th' top of yer head," was Ham's parting advice to Pom, as the negro boy prepared to roll himself up in his blanket for the night in front of the boys' tent, "or one of them Ingines will git yer scalp while yer sound asleep."

"Golly, dat am so!" and Pom's face lengthened and sobered, then it suddenly brightened, as his

eyes caught sight of a round iron frying-pan that had been hung up on a tree to dry. "I's gwine to fix um, so dat no scan'lous red mans gits his finggahs into dis niggah's wool," and, to the intense amusement of all, the negro clapped the frying-pan over the top of his head and proceeded to tie it there with thongs of deerskin, the handle projecting out in front like the beak of a bird; and then, with his precious kinks guarded by this unique protector, he rolled himself up in his blanket, to sleep the sleep of the frying-pan-protected.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE BEAVER COUNTRY

FORTUNATELY Pom had no use for his frying-pan protector that night, the hours of darkness passing without a suspicious sound to disturb the slumbers of our little band of trappers, and the morning dawning clear and cold. It was now past the middle of September, and in that altitude the nights were chilly with the approaching winter, although the days were still warmed with the heat of a hot sun.

"Git ready for beavers, boys," was Ham's greeting on this morning, as Rex and Dill came out of their tent just as the first rays of the morning's sun shone down on the little encampment. "We're goin' up-stream a few miles tew where Goose Creek comes in, an' then we're goin' tew try our luck. 'Twas a mighty good beaver country thereabouts th' last time Captain Tom was here, some three years ago, an' he reckons he knows where tew find th' beaver now."

This was good news to Rex and Dill. Ever since leaving Santa Fé they had been listening to beaver stories—marvelous tales of the habits and the remarkable instinct, intelligence some would

call it, of these wonderful little animals, that played such an important part in the finding of the west; and both boys were eager to study the beaver in his own home and to pit their wits against his in their efforts to secure his valuable fur.

Did you ever stop to think how much the West owes to the presence of the beaver, to the fact that its fur was sufficiently valuable to lure men away from all the comforts of civilization into the most hidden fastnesses of the then Great Unknown Wilderness west of the Missouri? In his search for the beaver the dauntless trapper went everywhere, where he thought there was a possibility of finding beavers. He traversed the great plains in all directions and explored all the streams and valleys of the mountains. On his return to the trading-post, loaded with furs, he told of his experiences, described the regions where he had been and compared data with other trappers. Thus, gradually, something of the vastness, the wonderful richness, the grandeur of the scenery, the mystery and romance of the mountains, the marvels of this new Western World, spread eastward, inspiring men like Pike, Long and Fremont, to come and see for themselves and to mark out for others the way to the West. But these men did not find the West. The trappers had already found it. Guided by trappers they explored scientifically and made known the results of their explorations of the world. In the slow march of civilization across the

continent westward from the Missouri, the trapper came first; and he came because of the beaver. Thus you can see how important was the part played by this little animal in bringing the white man into the West; and an unfortunate part it proved for him, for, alas! it meant his practical extinction.

But, of course Rex and Dill and their companions did no philosophizing of this nature. They were there for the fur on the back of the beaver, not to philosophize, and had not the slightest idea of the important page they were helping to write in the history of their country.

That was a rush morning in camp. Everything was done as speedily as possible; for the trappers were almost as eager as were the boys themselves to get their traps out and set for the wily little animal. A half hour after sunrise found them hurrying on their way up the Sweetwater, an hour later they had reached the mouth of Goose Creek, and in another half hour they had come to where Goose Creek widened out into a small pond, surrounded by a beautiful little valley set in the midst of encircling mountains.

"Here is where we camp," Captain Tom cried, jumping off the back of Don Lucifer. "We'll pitch our tents on the top of that little knoll by the side of the big rock," and he pointed to a huge rock a couple of rods away that jutted up out of the level ground of the valley thirty or more feet into the air.

"There's a spring of the best water I ever drank at the base of the rock; and, unless my eyesight is failing me, we won't have far to go to find beaver," and he glanced to where the dome-like tops of a number of beaver houses showed above the waters of the pond.

In a moment all hands were busy. The packs were taken off the backs of the mules, the two tents were pitched, the horses and mules were picketed and hobbled knee-deep in the rich grass of the valley; and then everybody, except the two men who had been stationed at suitable points to guard the encampment, got out their traps and began carefully examining them and everything needed in trapping the beaver.

Rex and Dill had brought five traps each with them. Hammer Jones had promised to show them how to set their traps and to initiate them into all the mysteries of beaver trapping. Now they got out these traps, tested the strength of their springs and chains, and prepared for the first practical lesson in trapping. But, to their great disappointment, Captain Tom announced that no traps would be set that day. He and Hammer Jones and three others of his most skilled men would spend the day exploring the surrounding country, learning where the beavers were, planning trapping routes and assuring themselves that there were no hostile Indians near. All the others would remain in camp, getting the ground about the camp in shape and putting

everything in readiness to begin the actual trapping the next morning.

When Captain Tom and his men returned that night there was great rejoicing. They had found the streams full of beavers, and had not seen a recent sign of an Indian. In addition Captain Tom and Ham had made a complete circuit of the little valley where their camp was situated, and had found it enclosed by walls of precipitous rocks that no human being could climb. This made the guarding of the camp a very simple proposition; for they had only to station a man at either end of the valley, at the entrance and the exit of the stream of water flowing through it, the only places where danger could enter, to make it impossible for Indians, they feared no other danger, to attack them without warning. Captain Tom and Ham had also each brought in a deer, and so they had an abundance of fresh meat with which to season their good news.

The next morning Rex and Dill awoke suddenly to find themselves sprawling one on top of the other in the middle of the tent, with the face of Ham grinning above them, the blanket from which he had dumped a sleeping boy gripped in either hand.

"Hey, thar! Time everybody was up!" he shouted, throwing a blanket at the head of each boy.

"Sick him, Buster!" yelled Rex to the grizzly cub, scrambling to his feet and hurling the blanket back with such true aim that it completely enveloped Ham's head.

Buster growled and made a rush for Ham's legs, arriving just in time to trip that worthy up, as he was struggling to get the blanket off his head, and send him tumbling through the tent opening on top of Pom, who let out an unearthly howl. Before Ham could get on his feet, Dill had the other blanket around his head; and for a couple of minutes there was a merry mix-up of whirling blankets, growling bear cub, yelling negro boy, struggling man and laughing boys. But, at the end of that time, all emerged safe and sound and smiling. Even Buster seemed to have a grin on his face, as he continued good-naturedly to worry one of the blankets.

A dash of the cold water of the creek over their heads and faces and Rex and Dill were ready for the day's work.

The discipline in a band of trappers was sometimes almost as strict as that in a detachment of soldiers. Each man had his appointed work to do. All could not trap. Some had to guard the camp and prepare the food. Others had to hunt for the deer and the buffalos and the other animals that supplied them with their fresh meat. And all, so long as they remained with the band, were subject absolutely to the orders of the leader. Their only laws were the ones they made themselves; and the welfare of all compelled all to see that the individual obeyed those laws.

On this morning Captain Tom announced the rules that would govern the camp while they were

in this beautiful valley. Five men would guard the camp, one man would do the hunting and the other men would attend to the trapping. Two of the camp-guards would be stationed at the valley's entrance and exit. The other three would remain near the tents, keeping watchful eyes on the horses and mules and doing the camp work—cooking the food, stretching and preparing for packing the skins of the beavers and other animals killed the day before, etc.

The sun that morning looked down upon a scene of bustling and pleasing animation in the little valley where our friends were encamped. Around the camp-fires in front of the tents the "cooks" were busy getting the breakfast. A little distance away the men, who were to do the trapping, were tying their traps together, getting them ready to swing upon their shoulders, filling their "medicine" pouches, examining their rifles—making sure that everything was just right. Still farther away the horses and mules, hobbled but not picketed, were contentedly feeding on the rich grass of the valley. And around this pleasing scene spread the little valley, with the clear water flowing through it, and around the valley towered the eternal mountains.

As soon as breakfast had been eaten, each trapper swung his bunch of a dozen traps upon his shoulder, picked up his rifle and started for the stream along which lay his appointed trapping route.

Some of these routes were miles in length, but,

where possible, were so laid out that the end of the route would leave the trapper near camp. The traps once set they were visited once a day, the animals caught, killed and skinned and the traps re-set. At night the trappers all gathered at camp, where the furs they had taken during the day were cleaned and stretched on pieces of wood. Then the men would light their pipes, and, reclining or sitting on their blankets around the camp-fire, would narrate their day's experience and tell tales of their adventurous life, while they smoked for an hour or more before rolling themselves up in their blankets for the night. Such was the daily routine of the life of the trapper while at work.

Rex and Dill on this day were to have their first lessons in actual beaver trapping. Both were to accompany Hammer Jones over his route, and watch him set and bait his traps, and learn all they could about the habits of this remarkable animal; and so eager were the two boys to be off that they could hardly wait for Ham to finish his breakfast. But, at last the huge trapper thrust his last piece of venison into his mouth, and rose to his feet.

"Reckon that'll do for this feed," he said, as he stretched his huge frame. "Now, yunks, git yer guns an' we'll be off," and he swung his bunch of traps to his shoulder, picked up his rifle and turned to the two boys.

In a moment Rex and Dill, their rifles in their hands, were by his side; and Ham led the way some

three miles up Goose Creek to where a little stream in another and larger valley poured its waters into Goose Creek. Their trapping route lay along this stream, which wound its way for some seven or eight miles near the outer edge of the valley, through groves of trees dear to the bark-loving stomachs of the beaver.

"This looks like mighty good beaver water tew me," Ham said, pausing to have a look up the tree-lined banks, "an' thar is beaver up thar, sure. See them twigs, lookin' as if th' bark had been peeled off fresh this mornin', a-floatin' down th' stream. That's a sure sign thar's beaver up-stream tew work," and Ham bent over and caught up one of the twigs, as it floated by. "Peeled within th' hour," he declared, after he had examined the bit of wood with critical eyes. "Jest have a look at it," and he handed the twig to the boys. "That would tell any trapper that he was near a beaver settlement. You see th' beaver lives mostly on th' tender bark of th' limbs of trees, which they cut up intew lengths 'bout three feet long an' store near their houses under th' water tew keep them fresh; an' when a beaver gits hungry he jest peels th' bark off one of them sticks an' eats it, an' then throws th' peeled stick intew th' water, an', naturally, it floats down stream, a sign tew all trappers. Now, keep 'bout a rod ahind me, an' move quiet as Ingines, an' we'll see if we can't catch Mr. Beaver at his work," and Ham began very slowly and very cautiously to

work his way up the stream through the trees and bush.

Rex and Dill followed a dozen or so feet behind Ham, pausing whenever the trapper paused and moving so quietly that not even a beaver's sharp ears could have heard them a couple of rods away.

For half an hour, it seemed two hours to Rex and Dill, Ham moved stealthily up-stream. Then the boys saw him pause behind a thick clump of water willows, and, cautiously parting the branches in front of him, peer through. For a couple of minutes he looked, motionless as one of the trees by the side of him, then, moving with the utmost caution so as not to make a sound, he turned and motioned Rex and Dill to advance.

The boys were well-trained in woodcraft, and so carefully did they move forward that they reached the side of Ham without the snap of a twig or a sound audible a few feet away. Then the three carefully parted the branches in front of their faces and cautiously peered through the water willows.

In front of them, perhaps ten rods away and clearly visible through an opening in the trees, was a beaver pond, with half a dozen lodges or beaver houses showing above its waters. Near the middle of the dam, which was nearly a hundred feet in length, a number of these remarkable little animal architects were busily at work repairing a break, evidently made by a recent freshet.

At the moment two boys looked through the

parted willows, three of the beavers were carrying small bushes and sticks to the break in the dam. When they had deposited their loads upon the broken part, they paused for a moment to look about and then dived into the water, reappearing again in a minute or two on the surface, and gathering a small quantity of mud in their fore paws plastered the sticks and bushes they had just deposited with it. Other beavers now appeared and soon a dozen or more of the little animals were hurrying back and forth with sticks and bushes for the break, always plastering down with mud the ones just put in place before adding others.

Evidently they believed that all work and no play made Jack a dull boy, for frequently they would pause for a little frolic in the water, frisking and dodging about on the surface as they chased one another hither and thither, or diving to the bottom with a slap of their broad tails on the water that sounded like the crack of a pistol. After indulging for a few minutes in this lively recreation, all would return to their work and the dam repairing would go on as before.

Presently Rex and Dill saw two beavers swim from one of the lodges to the shore almost directly in front of where they were concealed behind the willows. For a minute or two the newcomers stood on the bank gravely watching the workers. Then they climbed a little further up the bank to where a good-sized cottonwood tree stood, paused for a

moment in front of the trunk, as if they were considering how best to begin the work, and then, rearing themselves up on their hind quarters into a sitting posture, partly resting on their broad tails, they placed their fore paws against the trunk, one on each side of the tree, and began cutting into the wood with their sharp chisel-like teeth. Now and then one of them would tear off a small piece of the bark, and, holding it between his paws, feed himself, like a squirrel eating a nut. In a surprisingly short time the two animals had girdled the tree about ten inches above the ground, and were cutting deep into the wood, sometimes throwing off a chip three inches long by one and one-half wide and one-quarter thick, when Rex, in an effort to get a better view of the little workers, leaned too far forward, lost his balance, and, in recovering himself, stepped on a dry twig that snapped with a loud crack.

At the sound every beaver in sight dived instantly into the water, some of them giving their trowel-like tails a violent slap on the surface as they went under, producing a noise not unlike the explosions of a small pack of firecrackers.

"Thar, that's th' last we'll see of them," Ham said, pushing his way through the willows. "They'll git intew their houses an' stay thar 'til their lookouts tell them that all danger is passed. Beavers are a powerful knowin' animal, with wits 'bout as sharp as their teeth, an' you seed how sharp

their teeth was when they war a-pickin' chips out of that thar tree. 'Tain't every human that's up tew beaver."

"Do the beavers really have lookouts," inquired Dill, as the two boys followed Ham through the willows, "to warn them of danger and to tell them when it is safe to come out?"

"Sartain," and Ham paused to give emphasis to his words. "Beaver are 'most as knowin' as we be. Now, jest take a look at that thar dam," and he pointed to where the beaver dam obstructed the flow of the water and forced it to back up into a pond of several acres in extent. "Who'd think 'twas planned an' made by a leetle four-legged animal not more'n twice as big as a cat? Jest see how th' knowin' leetle fellers have taken advantage of th' land, an' made it jest whar an ingineer would have made th' dam, if he wanted to back up th' water in that medder. Come on an' we'll have a look at it, afore we set th' traps," and Ham led the way to the beaver dam.

Rex and Dill were greatly interested. This was the first beaver dam they had ever examined at close quarters; and they had heard the trappers tell so many stories of the skill of these little animal engineers and architects in building their dams that they had long wished to examine one, but, heretofore, they had had no opportunity to do so.

They found the dam composed of a great many sticks, some of them the trunks of small trees, laid

with their butts up-stream. These were weighted down and their interstices filled in with stones and mud, in the laying and plastering of which the beavers showed considerable masonry skill. Some of the stones must have weighed six or seven pounds, and many of the sticks were so large that it seemed impossible that they could have been placed there by the beavers.

"I don't see how they can carry such large stones and sticks and put them in the right place," Rex declared, as he stood on top of the beaver dam and looked down on the marvels of its construction. "Why, some of these sticks look as if they'd be a load for a man to carry!"

"An' so they would," answered Ham. "But th' beavers manage tew drag them or float them tew th' right place somehow; an', as for th' stones, I've seen th' critters walkin' on their hind legs like human beings, a-carryin' a stone as big as their head tucked up under their chins an' held thar by their fore paws, an' I've see 'em rollin' an' a-pushin' 'em with their front paws an' noses along th' ground. But, I reckon, we'd better be a-gittin' down tew work, or we won't git back tew camp afore dark. Now, you yunks keep 'bout a couple of rods from th' water, an' I'll see if I can't set some traps. You see a beaver's got a powerful smeller, an' won't touch anything that's got a man-smell about it; and when you're settin' a trap, if you wants tew catch one of th' cute leetle rascals, you've got

tew be powerful careful tew git rid of th' man-smell afore you leave it."

The pond near the shore was shallow, and Ham regardless of wet feet, now proceeded to wade slowly along its margin, thus destroying his scent, keeping his eyes closely on the shore for signs that would tell him there was the place to set a trap.

At last the two boys saw him stop and bend over and examine the edge of the water closely. He had discovered one of the runways of the beavers.

"I'll set one right here," he commented, as he loosened one of the traps from the bunch over his shoulder; "an', if I don't miss my guess, thar'll be a beaver in it afore mornin'," and, setting the spring of the trap, he carefully placed it in the runway some three inches below the surface of the water, concealing it as much as possible in the mud. Then he took one of the sharpened stakes he had prepared himself with, placed it through the ring of the trap-chain, and drove it firmly into the ground.

Now the trap was ready for the bait, or "medicine," as the trappers called it. Ham carried his "medicine" in a small pouch fastened to the belt around his waist; and he now took a small portion of it out on the end of his finger and smeared it over the peeled end of a small stick about a foot long, a number of which he had prepared and carried with him. This done, he pushed the stick into the ground between the jaws of the trap until its doctored end stood about four inches above the pan

of the trap. He also placed a little of the "medicine" on anything near the trap that he had touched, to destroy the man-smell.

The trap was now set, and, with a final look around to see that everything was all right, Ham continued on his way around the pond. In this manner he had set five traps, when he had completed the circuit of the pond.

Rex's and Dill's eyes had followed every motion he had made during the trap setting; and now, when he left the water and came up to where they were standing on the bank awaiting him, both were ready with questions.

"What makes the beavers so crazy to get at the medicine that you only have to put a little of it on the end of a stick to draw them to it?" asked Rex.

"What is that wonderful medicine made of anyway?" queried Dill. "I have heard so much about it since getting into the beaver country, that I should like to know how it is made."

"Sartain, of course you'd like tew know what th' medicine is," and Ham grinned. "But 'tain't 'lowable for me tew tell you, leastwise not until you're regular trappers. It's th' trapper's secret. But it sartain is th' stuff that gits th' beaver. They'll come for it as far as they can smell it, an' I reckon that's 'most a mile. Beavers have powerful good smellers. An' when he gits tew th' medicine an' tries tew git a taste of it, he jest naturally puts one of his feet intew th' trap, an' thar you have

him. I reckon th' medicine is something like th' same tew beavers as whiskey is tew men, an' nigh 'bout as fatal. But we must be gittin' on," and, picking up the remaining traps, which he had dropped on the ground by his side, he started on up the stream to look for more beaver.

About a mile farther up the stream they came to another beaver dam and pond, but considerable smaller than the one they had just left. Here Ham set three more traps, and continued on up the stream.

They found no more beaver dams, but discovered several places where the beavers had been at work recently, and Ham set their remaining traps along the banks of the little stream wherever he thought the prospect for beaver looked good. When the last trap was set, Ham straightened up and glanced at the sun.

"Great Ingines, it must be 'most three o'clock an' we've got 'bout seven miles tew go tew camp! I reckon we'd better hit a bee-line for home," and, with a look around to get his bearings, he started back for camp.

On reaching camp they found the other trappers all in. All reported having found splendid beaver prospects, and all expected to reap a rich harvest of pelts when they visited their traps on the morrow.

Rex and Dill had had an exceedingly interesting day; and, when they went to bed that night, it

seemed to the two boys as if they could hardly wait until morning to visit the traps and discover what Ham's luck had been. Tired as they were, they lay for some time talking over the doings of the day; but at last sleep stopped their tongues and closed their eyes, and they slept, as only those who have lived the life they were living can sleep.

CHAPTER X

THE MOUNTAIN LION

EARLY the next morning, just as the East began to lighten with the approaching day, Rex and Dill stole quietly from their tent and silently crept up to where the great length of Hammer Jones lay stretched out in his blanket on his bed of pine boughs underneath a tree. To their delight he was sleeping soundly and snoring loudly; for they were about to give him a dose of the same morning medicine that he had so often given them, and sleep was a necessary preparative for the taking of that kind of medicine. With broadly grinning faces, each lad now caught hold of a corner on the same side of his blanket and stiffened the muscles of his back and arms for the great pull.

"Ready," whispered Rex, glancing at Dill.

Dill glanced back at Rex and winked his right eye.

"Now, PULL!" yelled Rex.

Both boys, at exactly the same moment, gave a violent upward jerk to the blanket, with results, as unexpected, but much more welcomed, to the boys than they were to Ham.

The big trapper had chosen for his bed a spot of

ground about a rod from the brink of the water and only some four feet from where the bank sloped down abruptly to the pond; and the violence of the pull of the two boys had sent him whirling down this declivity and into the cold water, which he struck with a yell that made every trapper in the company jump to his feet, rifle in hand.

One glance at the body whirling down the bank, and Rex and Dill fled to their tent, whence they emerged a moment later to join the joyous crowd of trappers standing at the top of the bank guying Ham, who, dripping water from head to toe, stood staring blankly up at them.

"Ben takin' yer mornin' bath?" queried one of the delighted trappers.

"How's th' water? War-r-r-rm?" asked another.

"Dreamin' you was a beaver?" laughed a third.

At this moment Ham's eyes caught sight of the faces of the two boys; and, apparently, that moment solved the problem for him of how he came to drop from Dreamland into that pond of cold water, and a broad grin wrinkled his face.

"You smart yunks jest wait!" and he shook his fist at Rex and Dill. "This ain't a circumstance tew what I'll do tew you some fine mornin'," and, shaking the water from him like a great dog, he strode up the bank to the camp-fire, to dry his clothes and warm his shivering body.

As soon as breakfast was eaten, all who had set

traps the day before started out to examine them; and Rex and Dill again accompanied Ham, who, unlike most practical jokers, had not been made in the least ugly by having the joke played on him.

As they drew near to the first beaver pond, where Ham had set five traps, the boys found it difficult to restrain their desire to rush on ahead, so anxious were they to discover what had happened to the traps during the night.

"Now, jest hold yer sperits," Ham cautioned, as the two boys kept crowding ahead. "Beavers ain't caught by th' length of yer legs; an', when we gits tew th' pond, don't go rushin' down tew th' water, a-scatterin' th' man-smell all round th' trap."

As he spoke they came within sight of the pond. "Now, don't you dare come within a dozen yards of this trap, till I tell you tew, or I'll duck you, sure as my name is Hammer Jones," and Ham, bidding the boys remain on the bank a couple of rods away, hurried to where he had set th' first trap, entering the water when a couple of rods away and wading to the trap.

"He's got one! Hurrah, he's got one!" shouted Dill excitedly, as Ham bent over the quiet water, caught hold of the chain and, pulling it out of the water, exposed the limp form of a beaver, hanging by one of his fore paws to the trap.

"Sartain I've got one, an' he's a whopper!" and Ham held the dead beaver up triumphantly. "Drowned himself tew, tew save me th' trouble of

killin' him. Now, jest stay where you be," he cautioned the excited boys. "I'll be with you in 'bout three jiffies," and, taking the beaver from the trap, he dropped the carcass into the water by his side, carefully reset the trap and placed it again in position under the water, smeared a little more of the "medicine" on the point of the stick projecting above the jaws of the trap, and, picking up the dead beaver, waded a rod or more from the trap, and then, climbing the bank to where Rex and Dill stood, threw the beaver down at their feet.

"My, but he is a big one!" exclaimed Rex, as he and Dill eagerly bent over to examine the body.

" 'Bout th' biggest I've ever trapped," Ham declared, taking a critical look at the sleek wet body. "I reckon he'll weigh a good forty pounds. Maybe fifty," he added, as he bent and hefted the body with his hand.

This was the first beaver that Rex and Dill had ever had an opportunity to examine closely and they scrutinized its body with curious interest.

The color was a rich chestnut brown, showing darker than it really was on account of being wet. The fur was one-half to three-quarters of an inch long, with coarse hairs about an inch longer scattered through it. The paws were armed with long strong claws, the hind pair being webbed and having an extra claw not found on the feet of other animals. The front pair were small, and shaped

very much like human hands. The curious trowel-like tail was some eleven inches long by six inches wide, flat and scaly and smooth and hard, without a sign of the rich fur that covered the rest of the body. The long front teeth looked very much like short ivory chisels, and their edges were almost as keen as the edge of a sharpened knife. The ears were short, being but little longer than the fur, and the eyes were small and set well-forward in the head.

Such was the appearance of this remarkable little animal, whose rich fur was the lure that drew thousands of fearless men, when the West was in the making, to brave the perils and the hardships of the then unknown wilderness, and thus blaze the trails for the westward march of civilization.

"Now, if you'll jest step one side, I'll git th' skin off," and Ham drew his knife from its sheath. "We've got tew hustle, or we can't git tew all th' traps an' back tew camp afore dark. Trappin' beaver's work th' same as choppin' wood."

In a surprisingly short time, Ham's swift and skillful hands had the fur off the back of the beaver; and, giving the skin to one of the boys to carry, he proceeded to examine and reset or re-place, when necessary, the other traps he had left at this pond.

In the five traps he found three beavers, a most excellent showing. One of the traps had been sprung. Ham declared that some trap-wise old

beaver had done this by grasping a stick in his fore paws and thrusting it between the jaws of the trap until it hit the trigger.

"No use a-tryin' tew catch him," he affirmed. "He's up tew trap, an' would spring traps as fast as a feller could set them. We'll jest leave him alone an' make a try somewhar else," and Ham pulled up the stake and reset the trap in another part of the pond.

That night, when they returned to camp, they bore with them the skins of eight beavers; and, as nearly every trapper had been equally successful, there was great rejoicing around the camp-fire, when all had gathered there to relate the day's experiences.

The next morning Captain Tom assigned a trapping route to Rex and Dill, Ham gave them a quantity of the "medicine," and, just as the sun's first rays shone down into the little valley, they shouldered their traps and started out, about the proudest and happiest two boys in that western continent. At last they were real trappers!

The two lads, for companionship sake and safety, were to trap together. Their route began a couple of miles from the camp, and ran up one small stream, that wound its way for some three miles through the same valley where they had trapped with Ham, to its source in a spring at the base of the almost precipitous side of a mountain. Thence they were to cross over a low rocky ridge to where

another small stream began, and follow it down to Goose Creek, into which it emptied some three miles above the camp. There were two or three small beaver ponds along this route, and an abundance of fresh beaver signs told them that the beavers were at home. Consequently both boys were filled with high hopes as to what the results of their first day's trapping might be.

"Now," Rex cautioned, as the two made their way up the little stream, "we must be very careful not to leave our scent, or man-smell, as Ham calls it, near the trap. That seems to be the great thing in trapping beaver. And I think we had better arrange the trap setting this way, so that each can tell how many beavers his traps catch. You set the first trap all by yourself, and I'll set the next trap all by myself, and thus we'll take turns until each has set all his traps. Don't you think that will be the fairest way?"

"Yes," Dill agreed. "Only I think you ought to set the first trap, because you are the older. O, I do hope that each one of us catches a beaver in every one of his traps to-night. We'd have the laugh on Ham and the rest then. Not one of them ever did that. I heard them talking about it last night, and the nearest any one of them ever came to doing it was to catch nine beaver with ten traps in one night; and they all thought that was great. Now, if we should catch ten beaver in our ten traps the very first night we ever set them, wouldn't it

make them old trappers open their eyes. And we might happen to do it," he added hopefully. "Anyway, let's be just as careful as we possibly can be about setting the traps—There, see there!" and he pointed excitedly through an opening in the water willows that here lined both banks of the little stream, "There's a beaver dam and pond! You set the first trap, Rex."

"All right," Rex answered in a stage whisper. "Now keep just as quiet as you can; and I'll do just as Ham did and wade along in the edge of the pond until I come to a good place to set a trap. Then I'll set the trap, wade a rod or two from it, come out of the water, and you can enter and wade along until you have found a good place to set your trap; and in this way we'll go all around the pond."

Accordingly Dill walked along the bank of the pond a couple of rods from the water, while Rex entered the pond and began wading along the edge, keeping a sharp lookout for beaver signs that would tell him where to set the trap. In this manner the boys walked around the pond, each setting his share of the traps, and passed on up the stream. When they came to the spring, they had only two traps left. They stopped here to eat their lunch, a few chunks of dried buffalo meat, and then went on over the ridge to the other stream. A mile or more down this stream they came upon another beaver pond, and here they set the two remaining traps.

"It can't be more than three o'clock," Rex said,

when the two boys stood together again after the last trap had been set. "Let's have a look up that gully before we start back for camp," and he pointed to where a rocky narrow ravine split the side of the mountain half a mile from where they were standing. "I thought I saw a couple of mountain sheep among the rocks there a little while ago; and we've never even had a shot at a mountain sheep yet. I am sure Captain Tom won't care, because there's no danger from Indians. Shall we?"

"All right," Dill answered promptly. "If we can't get a sheep, we might get a deer; and I fancy we'd be all the more welcome at camp, if we brought in a deer on our backs—See, see there, about halfway up the side of the gully! There is a mountain sheep, as sure as I am alive! Come on!" and both boys started on the run for the gully.

"I wish we could kill a mountain sheep," Rex panted, as the two boys ran side by side. "Ham says the meat is even better than venison, and tastes almost like mutton, only with an added wild flavor that makes it all the sweeter."

"Maybe we can," Dill answered hopefully. "I heard some of the trappers wishing the hunter would get some sheep meat, so I am sure it would be welcomed at camp."

The gully at its bottom was not over a couple of rods wide and covered with huge rocks, which were thickly studded with tall pine trees, whose branches afforded the boys concealment as they cautiously

worked their way up the ravine toward the spot where they had seen the mountain sheep.

"I am sure the sheep were almost right over our heads," Rex declared, pausing in a little clump of pines and looking upward, "so I think it time for us to begin to climb the side of the gully."

Now, very cautiously, the two boys began to work their way up the rocky and almost precipitous side of the ravine, pausing every few moments to look carefully for the mountain sheep. Suddenly, just as Rex was about to peer over the top of a great rock shoulder high, Dill caught him excitedly by the arm and pulled him back.

"There they are!" he whispered, pointing backward and upward to where a huge flat-topped rock projected itself out from the side of the gully a hundred yards away.

Rex turned and looked and saw, standing out clearly on the flat top of the rock, a couple of mountain sheep, a large buck and a ewe. Both stood broadside to the boys, one a little behind the other, presenting splendid marks; and had the appearance of philosophically contemplating the beautiful surrounding scenery. The sheep had not seen the boys, all but their heads being hidden by a rock that rose between them and the sheep.

"You saw them first," whispered Rex. "Which will you take?"

"The big buck is mine," answered Dill, his voice

trembling just a little with excitement, as he slowly brought his rifle to his shoulder.

"All right. I'll count three. At the 'three,' fire," and Rex's eye glanced along his rifle barrel to a spot just back of the ewe's fore shoulder.

"One," began Rex—"two——three!"

At the word both boys fired.

The buck bounded convulsively up into the air, off the rock, and came tumbling down the side of the gully. The ewe whirled about on her four feet, as if she had been a top, started to run, blind with pain and fright, and went over the cliff after the buck, both crashing through the trees to the bottom of the gully.

"Hurrah, we've got them both!" yelled Dill, starting on the run down the gully toward the spot where the sheep had fallen, with Rex not four feet behind him.

The way thither was rough with rocks and sometimes almost impassible with trees and bushes, and, hurry as they might, it was a quarter of an hour before they approached the place where the bodies of the sheep lay. They had fallen in a thick clump of bushes and it was not until the two boys were within a dozen feet of the carcass that Dill's eyes caught sight of the body of the buck.

"There he is!" he cried. "My, what a splendid head of—"

The words stopped in Dill's mouth, for, at that

moment, a snarling growl caused both boys to turn their eyes a little to the right; and there, not five yards away, they saw crouching over the dead body of the ewe, a monster mountain lion. His eyes flamed with yellow lights, his fangs were red with the blood of the sheep, along his back the hair stood up straight, and his tail twitched and pounded the ground nervously. He looked like a great angry cat about to spring upon his prey.

At the instant the boys' eyes saw the angry beast he was crouching to spring upon them; and, with a chill at their hearts that no danger had ever brought there before, at the same moment they realized that both their rifles were empty. They had not stopped to load them after shooting the mountain sheep!

Something in their eyes, both boys stood as if they had been turned suddenly into stone their eyes staring straight into the eyes of the lion, caused the brute to hesitate, to glare back at them without springing. And thus the beast and the boys stood, glaring into each other's eyes. The boys did not dare move a muscle, not even to reach for their knives. They knew that at the first sign of a movement on their part, the lion would hurl himself upon them.

But, how long could their nerves and muscles stand the strain of the tension? How long before the lion would spring?

For a couple of minutes—to the two boys it seemed a couple of hours—they stood thus, the lion

and the lads; and then, from behind a rock, half a dozen rods up the gully's side, came the crack of a rifle.

The lion whirled half-way round, and then, biting and clawing at his side, rolled over and over on the ground in the agonies of death.

"I reckon you lads will know enough tew load your guns next time afore you go racing lunaticy-like through these here mountains," and Rad Dawson, the camp hunter, stepped out from behind the rock and began loading his rifle. "I was after that thar bighorn an' his mate, an' was just a-goin' tew shoot, when bang went your guns. Wal, you got them; but that mountain cat came mighty nigh a-gettin' you. Never go a rod in these here mountains with an empty gun in your hands," and, with this wholesome advice, he rammed powder and ball down the long barrel of his rifle; poured a little powder into the priming pan and walked to where the mountain lion lay.

Rex and Dill, at the sudden sound of that rifle shot, had both jumped, as if the ball had struck them, so great was the rebound of their tight-drawn nerves and muscles; and then all the strength seemed to leave their bodies for a moment and they were so weak they could barely stand. But, by the time Rad Dawson had reloaded his rifle, they had their strength and courage back again; and the first thing both lads did, before they moved a step from where they stood, was to see that their own rifles

were properly loaded. They had learnt the lesson of the mountains: never to go a rod with an unloaded gun in their hands.

Rad Dawson declared the buck killed by Dill the largest he had ever seen, with "th' biggest pair of horns on his head that he had ever heerd tell of."

And, indeed, the head was a magnificent one, the horns measuring three feet and two inches in length, with a circumference of eighteen inches at the base.

"I'm going to take that head home with me to show dad, and to keep as a memento of this—this experience," and Dill cast a shuddering glance to where the dead mountain lion lay.

"What do you suppose he has such big horns for?" Rex asked, as he lifted the heavy head. "Why, they must weigh fifteen pounds!"

"They're tew pertect his head," Rad answered. "When scart or chased by wolves, he'll jump right off a precipice, an' land on them big horns on th' rocks maybe thirty or forty feet below, an' never crack a bone or draw a drop of blood. That beast's made a-purpose for these here mountains," and the hunter's eyes rested admiringly on the sturdy deer-like body and great horns of the dead buck. "Now we must git tew work, if we're tew git back tew camp afore dark. I reckon that big cat's hide'll feel mighty comfortable this winter, leastwise I'm goin' tew take off his skin," and, drawing his hunting-knife, he began skinning the dead lion, while Rex and Dill cleaned the two sheep.

The ewe had been so badly torn by the mountain lion that only the saddles were taken from her body; but Rad bore the carcass of the buck in triumph on his back to the camp, while Rex with the saddles of the ewe and Dill with the skin of the mountain lion, followed, the hearts of both boys glowing with thoughts of the day's exploits.

Captain Tom gave the two lads a severe lecture for leaving their trapping route; and forbade them in the future while trapping to even fire off their guns, except in self-defense.

"O, I do hope we will find a beaver in every one of our traps to-morrow," Dill said that night, as he pulled the blanket up close around his neck. "It don't seem as if I could wait until morning."

"Go to sleep," retorted Rex, "and you won't have to do any waiting. That's where I'm going," and he rolled over and closed his eyes; and in five minutes both tired boys were sound asleep.

CHAPTER XI

TRAPPED

THE next morning Rex and Dill were so anxious to be off to examine the traps they had set the day before that they could hardly wait for breakfast; and the moment it was eaten they picked up their rifles and hurried away.

"Now remember what I told you about leaving your trapping route or firing off your guns," Captain Tom cautioned, as the two boys departed.

"I'll bet a dozen beaver skins agin a coonskin, that you don't find half a dozen beavers in your traps," called one of the trappers derisively.

"I'll take you," promptly answered Dill.

"Suppose you expect to find a beaver in every trap," laughed another.

"Yes," Rex laughed back. "The beavers will let us catch them just to spite you old trappers. So-long!" and they hurried on their way, giving no more attention to the calls of their friends.

"Isn't this an interesting life?" Dill said, his dark eyes and cheeks glowing with healthful animation, as the two boys hurried up the stream toward the first beaver pond where they had set traps. "I don't wonder dad is always longing to get back to

the plains and the mountains. It makes a fellow feel so strong and well all through himself, just as if his blood were some kind of an exhilarating wine. And then there is such a lot of grand and beautiful things to see, like great mountains, standing up as if God had placed them there just to show man what a little fellow he was, and little valleys with streams of water running through them, and rivers tumbling over rocks and falling down the sides of mountains. I never really knew how great God is until I saw the mountains. I don't believe I can ever be satisfied to live in a crowded city again."

"Neither can I," affirmed Rex. "And if it wasn't for getting those papers and taking them back to Uncle Noel, I don't believe I'd go back to New Orleans at all, at least not for a long time; but would stay here and hunt and trap. It is more like living. I wish I knew what those papers were about and why Uncle Noel is so anxious to get them. They must be something very, very important to send us all these miles."

"Maybe, when we find Kit Carson, he can tell us something about them," Dill suggested. "I know Kit Carson was with Uncle Manuel when he left the papers at the mission; and possibly he knows what they are about. I wish we could find Kit Carson before winter and not have to wait until the rendezvous next summer. But," and his eyes roamed over the surrounding wilderness of mountains and valleys, "'twould be like looking for a

needle in a straw pile to try to find him in these mountains, unless one knew in what particular part to look, so I reckon Captain Young and Captain Tom are right, and we've just got to wait until the rendezvous. Now we must be almost to the beaver pond and had better keep as quiet as possible."

For a few minutes the boys walked on in cautious silence; and then they came to the little opening where the beavers had made the dam, and Rex, with his heart thumping with excitement, advanced to examine the first trap he had set, while Dill stood on the bank anxiously watching him.

The moment Rex stepped into the pond a couple of rods from where he had set the trap, there was a splash, and he saw something struggling in the water near the trap-stake.

"You've got one! You've got one! Hurry!" cried Dill, excitedly running along the bank of the pond until opposite the spot where a beaver was vainly trying to break away from the first trap Rex had set. "Hurrah, you've caught one in the very first trap that you set! Now, if I only have as good luck!" and his eyes turned eagerly in the direction of the spot where he had set his first trap.

Rex knocked the beaver in the head with a small hatchet that he carried in his belt, released it from the trap, and carefully reset the trap, just as he had seen Ham do when he had been with him. Then he picked up the body of the dead beaver, waded a little ways from the trap, and, with his first beaver

gripped in his hand, proudly climbed the bank to where Dill stood.

"Isn't he a beauty?" Dill cried, his eyes sparkling with excitement, as Rex dropped the beaver at his feet. "Now, while you're getting the skin off him, I'll see if I've got one in my trap," and the excited boy, unable longer to curb his impatience, hurried off to see if he had a beaver in his trap.

As Dill approached the place where he had set his trap there was no splash of water to signal success to him. Around the trap-stake the water lay quiet and undisturbed, and the boy's hopes sank. He bent over the trap; and then, with a yell that must have made every beaver in the pond shiver with fright, he straightened up.

"I've got one! I've got one, too, Rex!" he shouted, dancing up and down in the water in his excitement. "He has drowned himself."

"Bully for you!" Rex called back. "But, if you don't stop yelling, you'll scare all the beaver in the pond to death. Set your trap again, and bring him here, and we'll see which is the biggest."

In five minutes more the two beavers lay side by side, with the two happy boys bending over them.

"Mine is a good two inches longer than yours," Rex declared triumphantly, when each beaver had been stretched to his utmost length.

"But, mine has a bigger tail than yours," Dill affirmed.

"What's the tail good for? It hasn't any fur on it."

"It's good to eat. Makes the best soup in the world; and I'm going to eat all of mine myself. O, if we only have caught beavers in all the other traps! Let's hurry and get these skinned so that we can see," and Dill unsheathed his hunting-knife and at once began taking the fur off his beaver.

In a few minutes the boys had the skins off, and were on their way to examine the other traps. To their inexpressible delight, every trap set in the pond had a beaver in it; and when they reached the spring at the head of the stream they had eight beaver skins with them, and they had examined only eight traps!

"Well, the dozen beaver skins that Bill bet me are mine anyway," Dill declared joyously, as the two boys threw themselves down on the grass by the side of the spring. "Now, if the other two traps only have beaver in them, won't we make those old trappers look cheap? Ten beavers in ten traps! And the very first traps we ever set! Come on. I can't wait. Let's not eat our lunch until we've examined the rest of the traps," and Dill jumped to his feet.

Rex was as anxious as was Dill to see what had happened to the other two traps; and, so without stopping to eat their lunch, although it was past the noon hour, the two boys set out for the other stream

of water, where they had set the last two traps the day before.

Rex had set his trap in the edge of the pond, near where he had discovered a beaver hole in the side of the bank and a number of fresh tracks that told him the beavers were at home. The boys approached this place with rapidly beating hearts. If there were a beaver in this trap, then their first day's catch would equal the best ever made by any of the old and experienced trappers in their party; and that would be a great honor for the two inexperienced city boys!

In their eagerness both boys, forgetful of all caution, crept down the bank, and Rex bent over and looked down into the water where he had set the trap. At first he could see nothing but the clear flowing water.

"Have you got him? Have you got him?" Dill whispered excitedly.

"N-o-o—Yes! Hurrah!" and the excited boy plunged into the water caught hold of the chain, and, pulling the trap up in view, brought out with it the limp form of a drowned beaver.

For a few minutes the two boys danced around the body of the dead beaver, as if they had been suddenly bereft of their senses, laughing and shouting in the exuberance of their joy. Dill was the first to remember there was yet another trap to examine.

Now, if this good luck would only hold out to the end! They must see, and at once! And, each catching hold of a leg of the beaver, they started on the run to the place where Dill had set his trap, about half a mile farther down the stream where a small beaver dam had forced the water back into a little pond. There was one large beaver lodge in this pond, and Dill had set his trap in one of the runways leading to this lodge.

"If there is a beaver in my trap, then we've done better than any other trapper in our party ever did," panted Dill, his eyes shining and his face flushing with excitement and exertion. "O, I do hope there is one! I do hope there is one, just so that we can say that we have beaten them all catching beavers, whenever they begin making fun of our greenness."

The bottom of the little pond was stony where Dill had set his trap, and so he had tied the chain around a small log. When the excited boys reached the place, both the log and the trap were gone.

For a moment Dill stared blankly at the spot where he knew the trap and the log should be, then his face brightened.

"I've caught one, and he has run off with the log and the trap!" he cried. "O, we must find him, or they will never believe that I really did catch him! —Hark! What was that?" and both boys turned their eyes quickly in the direction of the sound of a splash in the water, coming from the other end of the dam.

"There he is!" cried Rex. "Come on, quick, before he gets out into deep water," and he started running across the dam to where the beaver could be seen struggling in the water at the other end.

Rex reached the beaver a little ahead of Dill. The log to which the chain was fastened had caught among the sticks that made up the dam, holding the struggling animal within reach of the boy's hatchet; and, in a moment, he had bent forward and killed him with a blow on the head.

They had caught ten beavers, in ten traps, in one night, the very first time they ever set ten beaver traps!

Again the boys danced a war-dance of jubilation around the bodies of the two dead beaver and the skins of the other eight thrown on top of them; and then, after a little while, they quieted down, ate their lunch, skinned the two beavers, and, with the ten beavers' skins hanging over their shoulders, started back for camp—the two proudest and happiest boys in America.

When they came within sight of the camp they saw, to their surprise, that all the other trappers were in and gathered in an excited group around Captain Tom in front of the tents. Evidently something unusual had happened, and to them something unusual usually meant danger. But the boys were too excited over their ten beavers to give the matter any special thought.

"Hurrah!" Dill shouted the moment they came

within hearing distance. "We caught ten beavers in our ten traps! How is that for the city greenies?"

The men gave a glad shout when they saw the two boys, and yelled for them to hurry, but they did not appear to hear Dill's boast, or, if they heard it, they paid no attention to it.

"I wonder what can have—" began Rex, and stopped. The eyes of both boys had caught sight of a man seated on a log near Captain Tom.

"Look! Look!" cried Dill excitedly. "Rad Dawson has been hurt! His head is all bound up! Hurry!" and both boys broke into a run.

"I'm mighty glad to see you boys back safe. We were just a-going to start out after you," Captain Tom said, as Rex and Dill came running up.

"Why, what has happened?" and the eyes of the two boys glanced from the bloody bandage around the hunter's head to the anxious faces of the men.

"The cussed Blackfeet," and Captain Tom's eyes glinted. "Rad ran onto a large war-party of them a-coming down Goose Creek, 'bout five miles up; and me and Ham discovered another large war-party a-coming up the creek. They've got us penned up in this here little valley like a lot of fool-deer, and with no way of getting out without a fight. I ought to have known 'twon't Blackfoot nature to let as small a party of whites as us slip out of their clutches the way them Blackfeet did at the mouth of the Sweetwater. They've just kept

on our trail and waited for reinforcements; and now we've walked right into a trap with our eyes and ears wide open," and Captain Tom scowled his deep disgust at his own foolishness in permitting himself and party to be thus caught.

"But they ain't got our scalps yet, Tom, not by a jug full," and Ham brought his huge hand down with a resounding whack on his thigh. "We can fight our way out of th' trap, an' I reckon th' sooner we do it, th' better 'twill be for us."

" 'Twould be madness to try it," Captain Tom answered. "They've got each end of the valley guarded by at least a hundred, maybe two hundred, Indians, camped right across the valley where it ain't more'n twenty rods wide, with plenty of rocks for them to hide behind and shoot. 'Twould be sartin death to all for us to try to break through in a body; but," and his eyes lighted, "one man might get through under cover of the darkness of the night; and maybe find some band of trappers and get them to come to our rescue. Jim Bridger's party ought to be trapping somewhere hereabouts or some of the other bands. We can hold the devils at bay here, I reckon, as long as food and ammunition last; for I calculate they're planning on just keeping us shut up in this here little valley until we've used up all our ammunition or run out of grub, and then they can come and get us without much loss to themselves. That's the Indian way of fighting. Yes," and Captain Tom paused and his eyes searched the

faces of the trappers, "I reckon the best thing for us to do is for one of us to try to break through to-night and see if he can find help. But 'twill be a mighty risky thing to do and I am not going to tell anyone to go. I am going to call for volunteers. Now," and Captain Tom again paused and studied the faces of the trappers a moment, "let the man that'll go raise his right hand."

As if propelled by one arm, the right hand of every trapper was raised.

"Good! Not a coward in the party," and Captain Tom smiled grimly. "Now, who knows the country best hereabouts?"

"I reckon I do," and Rad Dawson arose to his feet. "Leastwise I've hunted an' trapped all through this country clear tew the Green River."

"But you're wounded," broke in Hammer Jones, "an' I—"

"Shucks!" interrupted Rad indignantly. "Th' wound ain't nuthin' but jest an arrer scratch 'long side my head; an' since I'm th' only man in th' crowd that knows th' country, 'cept th' Captain an' of course he can't go, I reckon it's up tew me tew git out of here tew-night an' try tew find that band of trappers. I'm yer man, Captain."

"I reckon Rad's right, boys," and Captain Tom's jaws came together decisively. "He's the man to go. 'Twould be foolishness to send a man out who don't know the country when we've got one to go who does. Better start a little after midnight, Rad;

and now you'd better go into one of the tents and get all the sleep you can before going. The rest of us must get to work at once to make this place as strong as possible. That rock will help a lot," and he pointed to the huge rock, near which they had pitched their tents, "and the spring will furnish us with all the water we want. I reckon the Indians won't begin the fight until to-morrow morning, and so we've got all the rest of the day to get ready for them. We'll get a wall around the spring the first thing to protect us when we go after water. Now everybody get to work," and Captain Tom, quick and decisive in everything, began rapidly giving orders to the trappers.

In a few minutes all, except the two men on guard and Rad Dawson who had gone to lie down in the boys' tent, were busy raising the walls to the improvised fort. Fortunately a little grove of trees grew near the camp. These were cut down as swiftly as strong arms and sharp axes could do it, and quickly formed into a wall running from the Big Rock, in such a manner as to include the spring of water at its base, and, circling around to the other end of the rock, enclosed a space large enough to corral their animals in, if necessary. Every man worked as if his life depended on his efforts, as, indeed, it did, and the wall grew apace. They began an hour before sunset, they worked some four hours after the sun had gone down; and in that short time, so skillfully and rapidly did they cut and

lay the logs, they had made a wall four feet high around their camp and sufficiently thick to stop an arrow or a rifle ball. Then the light from the skies was hidden by masses of black clouds and they were obliged to stop work.

All the mules and horses were now driven inside this enclosure and corralled in one end. Then a double guard was stationed outside the "fort"; and the rest of our little band of trappers, wearied almost to exhaustion by their strenuous labors, rolled themselves up in their blankets to get what sleep they could before the morning dawned.

Rex and Dill and even Pom had worked until every muscle ached and quivered with exhaustion. They knew that each log laid on the wall meant additional safety; and every muscle had been constantly strained to do its utmost. Now, when they entered their tent to get what sleep they could, they were so tired they could hardly drag one foot after the other.

"Well," Dill whispered, as the two boys lay down together—Rad Dawson had rolled himself up in the blanket of Rex, "it begins to look as if we were going to have the Indian fight we have been longing for."

"Yes," responded Rex. "And—and somehow, now that the fight is right at hand, I—I don't seem to care so much about having it happen—Not that I am afraid," he added quickly. "But, somehow, I never seemed to think that fighting meant hurting

and killing before. I only thought of the excitement and glory, not of the pain of the wounds and the horrors of death. But, aren't the trappers brave? Not one of them seems to fear the expected attack by the Indians in the least. They are only mad because they have allowed themselves to be caught in this trap."

"And look at Rad," Dill whispered, glancing to where the hunter lay snoring. "He's sleeping as soundly as if there were no such things as Indians in the world; and yet he knows that in a few hours he must be risking his life among the red fiends. I wonder what time it is. It must be getting almost time for him to start."

"Not for two or three hours yet, I think," Rex replied. "And we'd better be following Rad's example, and sleep while we can. My, but I am so tired that I think I could go to sleep with an Indian a hold of my scalp-lock. Good night," and the tired boys were soon sound asleep.

They remembered nothing more until sometime later in the night, when they were awakened by voices in the tent. It was pitch dark, and outside they could hear the rain beating down steadily on the tent.

"You'll find the Indians at the narrows, probably, 'bout two miles down the valley," they heard the low voice of Captain Tom saying; "but they might be scouts nearer. Got everything, Rad? Plenty of powder and ball? Be sure and put your powder

where it will keep dry. It's raining like the lakes of heaven had all sprung leaks, and so dark you can't see two inches afore your nose."

"Yes," the boys heard the hunter reply. "I got everything ready afore I laid down; an' I'm mighty glad it's dark an' rainin'. 'Twon't be much tew slip by th' Injuns in this darkness. 'Pears like th' Lord was on our side, as He otter be, in this fight. Now, I'll be goin'," and Rex and Dill heard the two men pass quietly out of the tent into the darkness and rain of that stormy night; and they gripped each other's hand tightly under the blanket, and lay for many minutes listening shudderingly, fearful of hearing the dreaded crack of a rifle or Indian warwhoop that would tell them that the brave hunter had been discovered by his merciless foes. But all they heard was the steady patter, patter of the rain outside on the tent-roof and the muffled sounds that came from the near-by horses and mules; and soon once again sleep closed their tired eyes and quieted their excited senses.

CHAPTER XII

THE FORT BY THE BIG ROCK

THE next morning the clouds had disappeared and the sun arose warmly in a clear sky. Not a sign of the Indians was to be seen, not a sound was heard that would indicate that their dread presence was so near. The sun rose higher until it shone down into the quiet little mountain valley and upon the camp of our trappers, sparkling in the swollen waters of the pond, drying the rain-soaked tents and warming the chilled bodies of the men and animals. All around the little encampment everything looked quiet and restful, as nature always does after a storm. Only within the rude enclosure of logs was the peaceful charm of this beautiful scene marred. Here there were no scenes, no thoughts of peace, only of war, of fighting, if need be, to the bittermost end.

There had been no laggards in camp that morning. All were up when the first light of day shone down in the little valley, watching, waiting for the attack that they knew must come soon now. Scouts had been sent out up and down the valley to report by the firing of their rifles the first appearance of the Indians, while those who remained were busy

preparing to make the best possible accounting with the redmen when they came. Some were at work strengthening the walls of the little fort, others were guarding the horses and mules while they fed near-by, and still others were bending over fires melting lead and molding it into rifle bullets. All, as they worked, were listening for the crack of a scout's rifle that would warn them that the Indians were coming, that the time to fight was at hand.

Rex and Dill were bending over one of the fires melting lead, while Pom was squatted down on the ground between them holding the molds. Already there was a little pile of rifle balls by the negro boy's side. Near Rex lay Buster, the grizzly bear cub, now grown to the bigness of a fair-sized dog, his head between his paws and his shrewd little eyes watching every movement of the boys. Pom's eyes were rolling in his head like white marbles, and he acted very much as if he were squatted on a bunch of cactuses instead of on the smooth ground. Evidently Pom was perturbed in mind and uneasy in body. Within easy hand-reach of Rex and Dill lay their rifles, and at safe distance from Pom lay the redoubtable double-barreled shotgun, that he had so indignantly discarded when he had had the adventure with the buffalo calf, and which Dill had brought back with him to the camp. For the first time since the buffalo hunt Pom had been prevailed on that morning, under the stress of the threatening

Blackfoot attack, to again take possession of the old gun, which had again been loaded with buckshot; but he handled the weapon gingerly, and always laid it down at the first opportunity, taking care to place it as far away from himself as he dared. He was afraid of the old gun; but he was still more afraid of the Indians from whom the gun might protect him.

"If dem red debbles done cotch dis niggah alibe, what am dey gwine to do wid him?" he queried, as he emptied the bullet-mold upon the little pile of rifle balls, his eyes rolling around as if he feared the "red debbles" might be within hearing distance. "Dat am what I want to obnosticate."

"See Bill, thar," and Ham, who at that moment had been passing behind the boys and had heard Pom's anxious query, paused and pointed to where one of the trappers was roasting a huge piece of meat over one of the fires. "If them Ingines git you, Pom, they'll spit you on a stick an' roast you over a fire, same as Bill is roastin' that hunk of venison, an', when yer done good an' brown, they'll eat you sizzlin' hot—unless," and Ham paused and winked at the two grinning boys, "unless you kill one on 'em, an' then they'll jest tie you tew a stake an' burn you alive. They only eats fat cowards," and Ham passed on with the log he was carrying, chuckling to himself.

"Golly!" and Pom turned a horrified face to Rex.

"Den dem scan'lous wildmans eat dis niggah, sizzlin' hot, jes' like he's a fat 'possum, if dey done cotch him?"

"Yes," responded Rex, "unless, as Ham says, you kill one of them, and then they will only tie you to a stake and burn you alive. You'd better keep that gun of yours within easy reach, Pom."

"I done spec'lates yo' is right, Massah Rex," Pom answered, edging nearer his gun; "fo' it sartinly am bettah to be burnt up tied to a stake, 'spectable like, dan it am to be circumulatin' 'round in de intestimals ob dem scan'lous redmans. I's gwine to shoot de pull-my-marys out ob de first red debbel I done sot mah eyes on—O, lordy! Who shoot dat gun?" and Pom jumped to his feet, caught up his gun and made a wild rush for a corner of the enclosure, where he crouched down behind the logs as closely to the ground as he could get.

The single rifle shot that had so startled Pom was quickly followed by half a dozen other shots, some sounding from up the valley and others coming from down the valley.

At the first crack of the rifle Rex and Dill had dropped their work, caught up their rifles and rushed to the wall; and every trapper in or near the fort had done likewise, while the men who were guarding the horses and mules began driving them hurriedly toward the safety of the log walls. In ten minutes every horse and mule was safe within the enclosure, and the trappers, their rifles in their

hands, were standing behind the log barricade, looking anxiously up and down the little valley.

At first they could see no one. Then there came another volley of shots, now sounding nearer, and, a moment later, the scout who had gone up the valley suddenly appeared, rounding a projecting ledge of rocks and running toward the camp at full speed. He was over half a mile from the barricade of logs, and was running as if the Indians were close behind him.

"Quick!" shouted Captain Tom. "Half a dozen of you men come with me!" and he vaulted over the logs and raced toward the running man, followed by six trappers.

Barely had Captain Tom leaped over the logs, when there came the single crack of a rifle from down the valley, immediately followed by a fusillade of shots, and the next moment the other scout appeared. He, too, was running as if the savages were close after him.

"Come on! We'll give Jack a helpin' hand!" and Ham leaped over the barricade, every one of the remaining trappers leaping with him. "Git back ahind th' logs, yunks!" he called to Rex and Dill, who had leaped with the others. "Some one must stay ahind. Git back, I say!" and the two boys reluctantly obeyed.

Hardly were the lads back within the walls of the little fort, when a dozen or more Indians came into view from around the ledge of rocks in the upper

end of the valley. They were running swiftly, evidently they had been chasing the scout; but the moment they saw Captain Tom and the trappers rushing to his rescue, they whirled about, and, darting back among the rocks of the ledge, began shooting at the fleeing man.

Rex and Dill stood watching the runner with bated breaths. Never before had they seen a human being made the target of rifle balls; and this man was a friend!

"O, if they should hit him!" gasped the more excitable Dill, trembling with apprehension.

"Ah-h-h! He is hit! He is hit!" he cried in horror a moment later, as the runner fell headlong to the ground. "Hurry! Hurry, Captain Tom, or they will get his scalp!" he screamed, as, with yells of triumph, a half a dozen Indians leaped up from among the rocks and raced toward the fallen man. "No—Hurrah! He's getting up! He's not hit! Bully for you! The fall was but a ruse!" he yelled in the greatest excitement, as the fallen trapper suddenly leaped to his feet, whirled about, and, throwing his rifle to his shoulder, fired at the nearest Indian, who plunged blindly forward for a few feet and fell heavily to the ground, while the other Indians, quickly catching their wounded comrade up in their arms, fled precipitately back to the safety of the rocks.

In a few minutes more the trapper was safe with

his comrades; and all were returning in triumph to the barricaded camp.

In the meantime an equally exciting scene had been taking place in the lower end of the valley. Jack Hodge, the trapper who had been sent out to do scout duty in this part of the valley, had delayed to seek the safety of the camp a little longer than he should have done, and, when he broke cover and started on the run for the barricade of logs, the foremost Indians were not a hundred yards behind him, while he was nearly three-quarters of a mile from his comrades hurrying to his rescue. The Indians, nearly all of those in the race were armed with rifles, fired their guns as they ran; but an Indian is usually a poor shot with a rifle, and not a ball touched Jack Hodge, who, to discomfit their aim, kept constantly jumping sideways. This mode of running, while it promised safety from the rifle balls, was not conducive to great speed, and his foes gained on him rapidly.

"Let her out another notch," panted Ham, seeing how swiftly the Indians were gaining on Jack "or they'll git him," and he and his companions strained every muscle to get within rifle shot before the redmen overtook the fleeing trapper.

One of the Indians, a man with an unusually long pair of legs, gained so rapidly that he was soon only a few yards behind Jack. He had thrown aside his rifle, and his only weapon was his tomahawk, which

he held in his right hand, ready to throw or strike when within throwing or striking distance. The nearest of the other Indians was a dozen rods behind him.

A glance backward showed Jack how close one of his pursuers was getting; but that sight did not trouble the bold heart of the trapper. If he could escape the rifle balls, he did not fear this one man armed only with a tomahawk. He glanced backward again. The Indian now was not more than a dozen feet behind him and the keen tomahawk was raised to throw with deadly aim. The time to act had come. With a swift bound sideways, Jack stopped, whirled about and swung the butt of his rifle above his head.

The Indian had no thought of such a maneuver on the part of the trapper, and was totally unprepared. He tried to stop, to hurl his tomahawk; but, before he could do either, the heavy butt of the trapper's rifle hit his head—and he was out of the race.

With a yell of triumph Jack rushed on; and, a moment after, the rest of his pursuers were sent scurrying back down the valley by a volley from the rifles of Ham and his comrades. Five minutes later all the trappers were safe within the barricade of logs.

Now, in order that you may properly understand the fight that followed between the trappers and the Indians, it is necessary for you to know something

of the situation of the little encampment that our friends had so hurriedly barricaded.

The valley, where they had pitched their tents, was, perhaps, two miles wide at its widest point, and, possibly three miles long, with sides gradually narrowing down to a width of fifteen or twenty rods at the entrance and exit of Goose Creek. The surrounding mountains were precipitous and impassable, the only way in or out of the valley being along the shores of Goose Creek. The little lake or pond was almost directly in the center of the valley, and was some forty rods wide by eighty long. On the east side of the pond and some five rods from the water, a huge rock projected up out of the ground thirty or more feet into the air. A little knoll near this rock, you will remember, was the place where Captain Tom had pitched their camp. At the base of the side of the rock nearest to the pond was the spring of water already mentioned. The rock itself was some twenty feet wide by thirty long, with almost precipitous sides and a flat top.

The barricade of logs had been built from the southwestern corner of the rock, the one nearest to the pond, for a dozen feet west, so as to include the spring of water, thence north for, perhaps, sixty feet, then eastward around the top of the little knoll for another sixty feet, then south sixty feet, and then west straight to the southeastern corner of the rock.

This made a barricaded enclosure about sixty

feet square, with the huge rock standing up midway in its southern side, like a great tower, which, indeed, it very closely resembled.

Westward from this little fort stretched the level surface of the pond for forty rods; and for two hundred yards around the remaining sides there was not a rock, nor tree, nor shrub behind which an Indian might safely conceal himself. An experienced trapper, like Captain Tom, never, while in the Indian country, camped where it would be possible for the cunning savages to conceal themselves within easy shooting distance of the encampment; and the intuitive caution of Captain Tom had, in this instance, caused him to select the most defensible camping-place in the little valley. Beyond this limit there were a number of scattered groves of trees and clumps of bushes and piles of rocks that might afford shelter and concealment to their savage enemies; but, in those days, few rifles would do effective shooting at two hundred yards and these were not apt to be in the hands of Indians, while, of course, the range was utterly beyond the reach of arrows.

Such, then, was the situation in which our little band of trappers found themselves on this morning, when the Blackfeet poured into the little mountain valley from the north and from the south, and laid siege to the Fort by the side of the Big Rock.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT IN THE VALLEY

"DON'T waste a shot, boys. Be sure you've got your Indian before you pull trigger," Captain Tom warned, as the trappers began stationing themselves around the walls inside the little enclosure of logs, the moment they were safe in the fort. "I reckon we can keep off them Indians as long as our powder and grub hold out; and we'd better begin right now not to waste a charge of the one nor a mouthful of t'other."

Large bodies of Indians were now seen gathering in both ends of the valley; but too far off for rifle ball to reach them from the fort. Evidently they were considering the situation; for they galloped about on their horses to different points of view; and, finally, half a dozen warriors from each body began circling round the outer edge of the little valley toward each other, being careful to keep out of range of the rifles of the trappers. When the two parties met they stopped, and, climbing to the flat top of a rock that overlooked the valley, stood there, within plain sight of the trappers, for half an hour conferring together. Then they climbed down off the rock, mounted their horses and galloped back

to the Indians awaiting them at either end of the valley.

"Now look out for some Ingine devilment," Hammer Jones, who stood near Rex and Dill, cautioned. "I reckon that's what that thar pow-wow on that thar rock meant."

"There must be about two hundred Indians at each end of the valley," Rex declared. "I've counted one hundred and seventy-five at the lower end, and there must be a lot I can't see; and Dill has counted about the same number at the upper end. Four hundred Indians against seventeen white men!"

"An' one on 'em a nigger," laughed Ham. "Wal, I calculate we're good for th' hull caboodle as long as our powder an' grub holds out; an' afore they give out Rad'll be back with a lot of trappers that'll send th' red devils scootin' over th' mountains, like stampedin' buffalos. Ingines ain't got no stumiks for chargin' rifles ahind logs, especially when thar's white trappers ahind th' guns; an' that's th' only way they can git us. Wal, I'll be durned, if they ain't a-goin' tew give us some palaver afore they begin tew shoot!"

As the honest trapper spoke, a tall chief was seen to detach himself from the body of Indians in the lower end of the valley, and to advance slowly toward the big rock where our trappers lay behind their log fort. When within two hundred yards of the barricade, he laid down his rifle and other

weapons, and, raising his empty palms to show his unarmed condition and the peaceful nature of his mission, he continued to advance.

Captain Tom now laid down his weapons, and, jumping over the wall, walked toward the Indian. They met about twenty rods from the fort. For, possibly, ten minutes they stood talking together, then the chief turned and strode back to his warriors, disdaining to give a single backward glance, although he knew that he was within easy range of the deadly rifles behind the logs. Captain Tom returned to the barricade, and, as he jumped over the walls inside the enclosure, there came a broad grin on his face.

"Well, men," he said, "seems we won't have to fight after all. Them there Indians have taken pity on our helplessness and, not being bloody-minded, they're willing to let us go without harming a hair of our heads, providing we'll get out of their country just as fast as our legs will take us," and he paused to regard the astonished faces of the trappers with twinkling eyes.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" ejaculated Ham.

"And providing," continued Captain Tom, his face hardening, "that we'll leave all our weapons behind."

"Never!" yelled a dozen of the men jumping to their feet. "We don't give up no guns!"

"And further providing," continued Captain Tom, his eyes beginning to snap, "that we leave all

our mules and horses and traps and furs and baggage behind."

"Wal, I'll be durned!" again ejaculated Ham.

"I told the chief we'd hang up a white flag, if it was surrender; and, if it was fight, we'd shoot off a rifle. Now, what do you say, men?" and Captain Tom straightened up to his full height, his strong jaws set firmly. "Shall it be fight? or surrender?"

"Durn 'em! Fight!" yelled Ham, jumping to his feet. "Everybody that wants tew fight make it manifest by shootin' his gun," and Ham threw his own rifle to his shoulder.

As if worked by one pair of arms, the rifles of the trappers and of Rex and Dill went to their shoulders. In his excitement, even Pom threw his own gun to his shoulder.

"Fire!" yelled Ham; and the rifles cracked and Pom's shotgun boomed like a young cannon.

"Golly!" and Pom stood proudly rubbing his aching shoulder, "dat sartinly am a pow'ful fine gun fo' kickin' an' bangin'. It done make mo' noise dan a dozen ob dem crackers," and his eyes rested a bit contemptuously on the rifles of the boys.

Both boys laughed, and complimented Pom on his courage in shooting the gun off; and told him "to load her up again" and to "be sure and put in a big load," because now they were going to fight the Indians and the gun might be the means of saving him from being eaten up, sizzling hot.

"Am we gwine to fight all dem redmans?" and Pom looked from the Indians crowding in one end of the valley, to the crowd of red warriors gathered in the other end.

"Yes, Pom," Rex replied, his face sobering. "It's fight, or be killed without fighting, and white men will always fight for their lives."

"An' dis niggah can't nohow run away," and his glance rolled around the surrounding valley, shut in by wild and rugged mountains; "an' I's jes' gotter fight, or dem scan'lous redmans done roast dis niggah alibe an' eat him sizzlin' hot," and Pom shuddered.

"I reckon that's about it, Pom," and there was no smile on Rex's face as he answered.

"Den I's gwine to make dis ol' gun do some pow'ful loud hollerin', eben if she done ram mah sho'l-dah-blade tro' de back ob mah neck, befo' dem redmans gits dis niggah," and Pom began reloading his gun, his fat face wrinkled into ludicrous lines of determination.

The rifle volley of the trappers had been answered by furious yells of defiance from the Indians; and now they began slowly advancing toward the little band of trappers from both ends of the valley, spreading out as they advanced, so that when the two bodies met there would be a complete circle of armed warriors surrounding the little Fort by the Big Rock. Rocks and trees and bushes partially

hid the advancing Indians from the anxious eyes in the fort; but their hideous yells told where they were when the eye could not see them.

"Now, don't get excited and waste any bullets on them while they're out of range," Captain Tom cautioned, as the circling lines of yelling Indians came nearer. "They'll try to draw our fire, and get us to waste all the powder they can; and once our powder's gone, we're gone," he ended sententiously.

The circle of Indians was now so near that it seemed to Rex and Dill as if some of the savages must be getting almost within range of their rifles; but not a gun was leveled at them. The trappers stood, scattered at regular intervals around the enclosure, their keen eyes quietly watching every movement of the Indians, their long rifles held in their hands ready for instant use; but there was no excitement among them, only a tense watchfulness that showed how ready they would be to act when the time for action came.

About three hundred yards north of the little fort, near the end of the pond, was a grove of willow and cottonwood trees that spread out over the valley for twenty or more rods. For some time the eyes of Captain Tom had been watching this grove intently. He now motioned Hammer Jones to his side.

"Looks to me, Ham," he said, "as if the Indians were getting ready for some devilment in that there

grove. The woods are alive with them, or else my eyes are failing me."

Ham stood for a couple of minutes, scrutinizing the grove keenly, before he answered. Then he turned to Captain Tom.

"I reckon you're right, Captain," he agreed. "An', if I don't miss my calculations, they're gittin' ready for a charge, a-hossback, tew. Seems as if I could see hosses—Hi!—Hello!—Wal, I'll be durned!"

Captain Tom and Ham both turned quickly, for at that moment a large body of mounted Indians burst out from behind a ridge of rocks half a mile to the south, and, yelling like fiends and lashing their horses, rushed straight toward the barricade of logs.

"Hold your fire! Hold your fire!" cried Captain Tom, running to the threatened side of the fort. "Don't shoot until you are sure of your Indian or horse. We must make every shot of the first volley count," and he threw his big Remington across the top of the log barricade.

All the other trappers quickly followed Captain Tom and Ham, Rex and Dill with the rest, leaving the other sides of the fort unguarded for the moment.

It was a terrible sight, especially to eyes unaccustomed to such scenes of savage warfare, to see those wild men on their wild looking horses, flourishing their weapons and yelling their dreadful war-

cries, rushing down upon that little band of trappers, as if they would crush and overwhelm them, as the angry hurricane crushes and overwhelms the forest; and no wonder that the faces of Rex and Dill grew white and the hands that held their rifles trembled, as they stood with their guns held across the top log of the wall and their eyes on the on-rushing savages, waiting for the moment to shoot to come.

Suddenly Captain Tom whirled about and looked northward. In the excitement of the moment he had almost forgotten the grove of trees in the other end of the valley and the Indians seen gathering there. At the first glance, even his bronzed face whitened and the blood jumped with a bound through his hot veins.

Fully two hundred Indians, all mounted on their war-ponies, were riding, swift and silent as the wind, straight toward the little fort. Already they had covered nearly half the distance. In another minute their cunning ruse would have been successful.

"Quick! Ten of you men with me to the other side of the fort! The rest remain where you are!" and, even in the intense excitement of that moment, there was no tremor in Captain Tom's voice, and not for an instant were his wits confused.

"Down behind the logs!" he cried, as the ten men leaped with him to the other side of the walled enclosure. "Don't let the Indians see you until you

shoot! We will give them a dose of their own medicine. Don't a man of you shoot until I tell you to!" and, with his lips drawn tightly across his set teeth, Captain Tom crouched behind the logs, his men crouching along the wall by his sides.

Rex and Dill had sprung with Captain Tom to the opposite side of the fort; and now bent, crouching with the others behind the wall, looking through chinks between the logs at the on-coming Indians.

The Indians rode about six feet apart, six ranks deep, naked to the breech-cloths, their weapons held ready in their hands, their faces, contorted into horrid grimaces, showing above their horses' heads; and not a sound coming from their dread ranks, but the dull thuds of their horses' hoofs beating down upon the long dry grass of the valley.

"Each man shoot at the Indian straight in front of him," cautioned Captain Tom, "and don't pull trigger until you're sure you've got your man—Steady—Steady—Wait!"

The Indians were now so near that they could see their glistening bead-like eyes, even the fiendish grins on their wild faces—and still Captain Tom remained impassive.

Now they were almost upon the log walls, were just opening their mouths for the terrible war-whoop—

"I'll take the chief on the black horse. Now—Ready—Fire!" and Captain Tom sprang to his feet and threw his rifle to his shoulder.

As one man the trappers leaped to their feet and poured their bullets into the charging mass of Indians.

The chief reeled on the back of the black horse and tumbled headlong to the ground. A dozen other warriors swayed in their saddles, clinging desperately to their horses' necks or falling off their backs to the ground.

At this critical moment Pom managed to pluck up courage enough to pull both triggers of his heavily loaded shotgun; and, with a tremendous bang—bang, the two charges of buckshot were poured into the jumbled mass of warriors and horses.

A half a dozen Indians reeled in their saddles, and a half a dozen horses plunged madly, while Pom, himself, was kicked flat on his back; but the shots had been the last straw needed to break the back of the charge, and with wild yells the Indians wheeled their horses about and fled, followed, before they were out of range, by another volley from the quickly-loaded rifles of the trappers.

During these stirring moments Hammer Jones and the men who were with him at the south side of the enclosure had been having an almost equally exciting time. The Indians here had timed their charge so as to come within range a few minutes behind their comrades on the north; but, when they did come, they came like a whirlwind of savage

HALF-A-DOZEN INDIANS REELED IN THEIR SADDLES.

fury. The first volley of the trappers did not stop them, although it emptied a number of their saddles; and they were within ten rods of the log walls when the defeat of their comrades on the north, knocked the wind all out of the sails of their courage, and they fled precipitately out of range of those deadly rifles behind the log walls.

Now, how the trappers did yell and cheer! They leaped upon top of the log walls and swung their rifles around their heads and shouted their defiance to their savage foes; and then they quieted down and waited, with loaded rifles, for well they knew that this was but the beginning of the battle.

"I reckon them Ingines got their stumicks plumb full of chargin' that time," Ham said, smiling grimly. "But they sure will want our scalps now powerful bad, seein' we got so many of their men," and his eyes glanced over the surrounding valley, dotted here and there with the bodies of fallen Indians and horses.

"Golly!" and Pom stood before Rex and Dill, one lip very much swollen from the effects of the gun kick, his left hand held against his aching right shoulder, "dat am a pow'ful gun fo' killin' Injuns," and he glanced in the direction of his gun, which still lay on the ground where it had been kicked by its discharge. "I done sawed pieces ob redmans flyin' ebbery whichways, when I shooted. I reckon no redmans done gwine eat dis niggah now, sizzlin'

hot," and he puffed out his fat chest as proudly as if the defeat of the Indians had all been owing to the prowess of his unaided arm.

"Bully for you, Pom," and Rex clapped the negro boy heartily on the shoulder. "That certainly was a great shot. But load your gun up again. The Indians might make another charge almost any time."

"Sartinly. I was jes' gwine to load her," and Pom hurriedly picked up his gun and began ramming powder and buckshot down its two barrels.

For a couple of hours after the charge the Indians made no hostile movements, but the warriors could be seen gathered in excited groups out of range all around the little valley, while their chiefs and headmen were evidently holding a council of war. At the end of this time, a string of warriors, stretching across the eastern half of the lower end of the valley began moving slowly toward the encampment.

"Now, what can th' vermints be up tew?" commented Hammer Jones, as he and the other trappers stood watching the advancing Indians with anxious eyes. "Can you make out th' special brand of this new kind of Ingine devilment, Tom?" and he turned to Captain Tom, who stood by his side scanning the approaching line of warriors, his forehead corrugated with wrinkles.

"You've got me, Ham," Captain Tom replied, "unless—"

He suddenly straightened up, his face whitening beneath its tan, as the long line of Indians halted and each warrior knelt and bent over in the grass.

"My God, they're going to set the grass on fire!" he cried, as little curls of smoke were seen rising upward in front of each Indian. "And there's enough long dry grass in it to make it burn like tinder! And the wind is blowing right this way!" He paused and looked anxiously around into the whitening faces of the men.

Not a man there but knew at the first glance what that long line of starting fires meant—a wall of fire swiftly growing higher and hotter as it came nearer, racing down upon them with the speed of the wind, charged with the hot breath of death, human strength, human skill, human courage helpless to stay its awful course.

For a minute the horrified men stared into the faces of one another, then the look of grim dauntless courage, the courage that fears no death no matter what the form it comes in, came back into each face.

"We can take to th' water of th' pond," suggested one of the trappers.

"'Twould only be to make targets of ourselves for the Indians," Captain Tom replied. "They'd shoot us down afore we could get out of the water."

"Can't we git on our hosses an' charge th' skunks up th' valley? Better tew die fightin' that way, than to stay here to be roasted like chunks of venison,"

and the eyes of Hammer Jones glinted savagely.

For a minute Captain Tom did not answer, but stood, his eyes fixed on the long line of distant blazes that were rapidly growing brighter and higher and coming nearer, then his jaws came together with a snap and he turned swiftly to the men.

"Ham is right," he said. "Saddle the horses and the mules and we'll charge the devils. Some of us might get through; and it is sure death to all of us to stay here—and it's roasting! Now get the saddles on mighty quick, for there won't be a minute to spare," and he sprang for his own saddle and bridle, and with him sprang all the other trappers and Rex and Dill and Pom, each for his own horse or mule.

And there was need of haste; for by this time the little blazes that the Indians had kindled had all united into one great wall of fire, that, driven by the wind, was rushing down upon them with the speed of a race-horse, while in wake of the fire the exulting Indians were yelling and dancing like fiends incarnated. They knew that the charge of their red ally could not be driven back, even by the deadly bullets of the trappers.

In three minutes the saddles were all on the backs of the horses and the mules; and all were ready for the charge—seventeen white men against hundreds of Indians hiding behind rocks and trees! Not one of them but knew what the issue would be—a gallant charge to an herioc death!

At this moment the eyes of Rex happened to glance upward and rested on a jagged point of rock that projected out from the top of the Big Rock some thirty feet above his head. For an instant he stared at that jagged point, and then he turned quickly.

"Captain Tom," he cried excitedly, "look, there at that point of rock!" and he pointed upward. "Couldn't we throw a rope around it, and fasten it there, and climb to the top of the rock? We'd be out of the reach of the fire then, and—"

"The boy is right!" almost yelled Captain Tom, leaping toward their packs where a number of coils of strong rope lay.

In a moment a dozen hands were swiftly at work tying knots about a foot a part in the rope, to aid them when climbing; and when a sufficient length of rope, some sixty feet, had been thus prepared, Captain Tom tied a stone in one end, and stepped to the side of the rocks to throw it over the projecting point. At the first cast the stone passed over the point of rock and fell to the ground on the other side, leaving the rope hanging from the rock. Captain Tom gripped both ropes together and pulled strongly. The rope held firmly.

"Up with you!" and Captain Tom turned peremptorily to Rex. "You saw the point and you go up first."

For an instant Rex hesitated, then he threw both arms round the glossy neck of White Cloud, and

sobbingly bid him good-by. He never thought to see the noble gift of White Otter again.

"Hurry! There ain't a moment to waste," and Captain Tom caught Rex by the shoulder and pulled him toward the rope.

With a last look at White Cloud, Rex caught hold of the rope and began rapidly climbing upward. In a few seconds he had reached the point of rock and pulled himself up on top of the Big Rock.

"Now, you," and Captain Tom turned to Dill.

In a minute more Dill was by the side of Rex.

"Now, nig," and Captain Tom caught Pom by the arm and jerked him toward the rope. "Get up that rope like a streak of black lightning."

Pom rolled his eyes up toward the face of Captain Tom, grabbed the rope and went up it like a squirrel up a tree.

Then one by one the trappers climbed the rope to the top of the Big Rock. The rifles and an abundance of ammunition and what food could be quickly got together had been tied up into bundles; and these were now swiftly pulled by ropes to the top of the rock, Hammer Jones and Captain Tom alone remaining on the ground.

"Now we must throw down the logs so that the horses and mules can get out," and Captain Tom, with Ham by his side, sprang to the wall of logs.

In another minute the two men had made an opening large enough for the horses and mules to escape; but they had not done this an instant too

soon, for, as they leaped back to the rope, the wall of fire was within a couple of rods of the Big Rock, and the horses and mules were plunging madly, crazed with fear. They could hear the roar of the flames and feel their hot breaths, as they raced up the rope; and strong hands grabbed them and pulled them to safety, just as the fire, with a rush and roar swept down upon the Big Rock.

"Flat! Down flat on the rock!" panted Captain Tom, as he threw himself, face down, at full length on the rock.

In a minute the wall of fire had swept by; but, in that minute, so intense was the heat, that, even on top of the rock thirty feet above the ground, our friends felt as if they had been suddenly thrust into a hot furnace, and then as quickly drawn out again, as the cool breeze that followed the flames struck them.

They found the center of the top of the Big Rock as level as a floor, with a bulwark of rocks from a foot to three feet high around its outer edge, sufficient to protect them from the fire of the Indians.

For a few minutes after the fire had swept by they lay almost motionless on the rock where they had thrown themselves, then Captain Tom and Ham began cautiously raising themselves up on their knees.

"The rest of you stay right where you are, until me and Ham see what them Indians are doing," Captain Tom commanded, as he and Ham crept,

one to each side, and cautiously looked out over the bulwark of rock.

From the south a large body of Indians were advancing on foot in the wake of the fire, as swiftly as the heat from the still smoldering grass would allow them. To the north the fire was still raging, of course hiding everything else in that direction from view. The horses and mules had all sought refuge in the pond, and were now wading and swimming toward its opposite side, where another large body of Indians were waiting to capture them. Such were the scenes that met the anxious eyes of Captain Tom and Ham.

"Now everybody get their guns ready and keep quiet and down where the Indians can't see you; and we'll give them there advancing braves a mighty unpleasant surprise party. They're expecting to find nothing but roasting white flesh," and Captain Tom smiled grimly.

The bundle containing the rifles was now as quickly and as silently as possible undone; and, as fast as each had his rifle in his hand, Captain Tom or Ham stationed him along the south side of the top of Big Rock, with instructions to keep down out of sight of the advancing Indians until the word was given.

The Indians came on slowly, their eyes on the smoking pile of logs that had been the trappers' fort, fearing that even the flames had failed to master those terrible white men; but, when they came

near and still saw no signs of life, their courage grew. So far they had not uttered a war-whoop, nor made a sound, but had crept silently over the blackened ground toward the smoldering wall of logs by the side of Big Rock. Now, when within twenty rods of the rock, and still not a sound not a motion from their dreaded foes, they felt assured that the flames had well done their terrible work; and, unable to longer control their impatience, they yelled their war-whoops and sprang toward the rock, eager to gloat their eyes on the smoking bodies of their enemies.

At that moment Captain Tom turned to his comrades on the top of Big Rock.

"Now—Steady—Take good aim—Ready—Fire!" he cried, and the sixteen rifles and the two barrels of Pom's shotgun sent their bullets into the ranks of the startled Indians.

For a moment the Indians acted as if stunned by this unexpected volley, then, as they saw their comrades falling all around them, they whirled about and fled in every direction, a dozen or more of them in their panic running straight for the shelter of Big Rock, unseen by the trappers, who were reloading their guns as swiftly as they could ram powder and ball down them.

Again our trappers cheered lustily.

After this second disaster the Indians were too wary to come within rifle range of Big Rock; but contented themselves with shouting their defiance

from a safe distance. They knew that all they had to do now was to wait for starvation or thirst to conquer the dauntless trappers.

It was now nearing the noon hour and the sun beat down hotly on the top of Big Rock. During the excitement of the fight and the fire our friends had given no thought to their physical need; but now, when all was quiet and they were safe from any immediate danger, all discovered that they were very thirsty, and with this discovery came the terrible knowledge that they did not have a drop of water with them on top of Big Rock.

"I'll climb down th' rope an' git sum water, while you fellers keep th' Injuns at a distance," one of the trappers said. "We've got to have water. I reckon I can find somethin' down thar in which to carry it up," and, picking up the knotted rope, which had been drawn to the top of the rock, he tied one end around the projecting point of rock, and, dropping the other end to the ground, swung himself out on the rope and started to climb down.

Rex was standing near the point of rock; and, suddenly, just as the trapper's head was about to pass below the edge of the rock, he saw a spasm of pain and horror pass over the face, saw the hand gripping the rope above the head let go, the head drop downward, and, after a moment of horror, heard the thud of the trapper's body when it hit the ground below. The next instant the ears of all were startled by the exultant war-whoops of the

Blackfeet warriors, who had reached the shelter of Big Rock unseen by the trappers and had remained there hidden at its base.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing, the trappers could do to help their comrade. The exulting war-whoops told them that he was beyond all earthly help; and for one of them even to thrust his head out over the edge of the rock to look down, would be to court instant death from the arrows or the bullets of the Indians below.

They were penned on top of Big Rock!

There was no water procured that afternoon; and, when at last the long hours of daylight had passed slowly away and the chill and the darkness of night came, all were suffering intensely from thirst. If they lived they must have water before many hours.

"I reckon it's up tew Rad Dawson tew git us out of this hole, or ruther off th' top of this here rock," Ham said, when it became so dark that it was impossible to see a rod away from the Big Rock. "An' seein' thar's absolutely nuthin' we can do but jest wait, I'm goin' tew try tew git some sleep, an' fergit thar's such a thing as water," and he stretched himself out on the hard rock and, strange to say, in a few minutes, in spite of his thirst and the cold the hardy man was sound asleep.

Nearly all the other trappers followed Ham's example and, like him, in spite of the cold and their thirst, succeeded in going to sleep; but there was no

sleep for Rex and Dill that night. They had no blankets, and, in addition to their thirst, which was becoming more insistent each moment, they suffered greatly from the cold. Throughout all the long hours of that terrible night they sat close together, their backs to a rock, hardly speaking a word, but every now and then giving each other a reassuring clasp of the hand. Around them, in the distance, they could see the camp-fires of their enemies burning brightly, and, until long after midnight, they could hear the sounds of their wild orgies.

But the longest, the most horrible of nights must come to an end sometime; and, at last, the anxious eyes of Rex and Dill were gladdened by the sight of a red glow in the east that told them day was dawning. The sun would at least bring warmth; but their thirst, the horrible dryness that was parching their tongues and cracking their lips, what help was there for that?

Almost at the same moment that the first rays of the morning sun touched the top of Big Rock a volley of rifle shots broke the stillness of the early morning; and the Indians in the lower end of the valley were seen to be in the wildest commotion. A moment later there came another rifle volley, then another, followed by loud cheers, and then a confused mass of Indians rushed out of the narrows at the southern end of the valley and fled northward in every direction, some mounted on horses and others running, but all in a great panic.

"It's Rad and a brigade of trappers!" cried Captain Tom, leaping joyously to his feet at the sound of the first rifle volley. "I knowed he'd bring us help. Hurrah!" and all joined in the hurrah as loudly as their parched and cracked throats and lips would permit.

"They've got 'em stampeded!" shouted Ham a moment later, as the Indians broke and fled northward. "An' thar they come! Hurra!! Hurra!!!" he yelled, swinging his hat wildly around his head, as a compact body of wild looking men dressed in deerskins, sprang into sight in the lower end of the valley, and, yelling and shooting at the fleeing Indians, swept northward straight toward the Big Rock.

In their excitement and joy at their deliverance our trappers gave no thought to the Indians concealed at the base of Big Rock; and they fled northward without a shot being fired at them by our friends on the top of the rock.

With loud cheers, the trappers, one hundred and fifty strong, swept on up the valley, coming as swiftly as they could make their sturdy little horses run; and before them, as fast as horse legs and man legs could carry them, fled the Indians to the northern outlet of the valley, where they rallied behind the rocks of the defile and yelled their defiance to the trappers.

"Now, let's give them a volley and a cheer, just to let them know that we're still alive and mighty glad

to see them," Captain Tom cried, as the band of trappers came nearer. "Everybody ready! One two—three—Fire!"

All, at the command of Captain Tom, had sprung to their feet, their rifles to their shoulders, and, at the word, fire, every rifle banged joyously and again the two barrels of Pom's old shotgun boomed loudly, while the lusty cheers that followed cracked their parched lips until the blood ran.

The advancing trappers answered with loud shouts and a rifle volley, and came dashing on toward the Big Rock faster than ever.

At the head of the brigade of trappers rode a man on a large gray horse. For sometime the eyes of Rex and Dill had been on this man. Both were wondering if the leader of the band of trappers might not be the man they were so anxious to see—Kit Carson. At last Dill could contain his impatience no longer, and he turned to Hammer Jones.

"Isn't that man on the big horse Kit Carson?" he asked. "He looks something like the way father described Kit."

"He sure does look some like Kit," Ham answered; "but I can't jest make out for sartin who he is yit."

At that moment the man on the gray horse turned in his saddle to give an order to his men, and Ham, for a moment, caught a clear view of his profile, and his face lighted up.

"It's Jim Bridger an' his trappers!" he declared

joyously. "Now let's git down off this rock as fast as th' good Lord 'll let us, git some water inside of us, an' be ready tew welcome them," and he swung the knotted rope, one end of which was still fastened to the projecting point of rock, down to the ground, and, catching hold of it, began rapidly to descend.

Rex and Dill and Pom were not allowed to climb down the rope until all the trappers had reached the ground. This gave Captain Tom and Ham time to remove and cover the horribly mutilated remains of the trapper the Indians had killed; and all the boys saw of the corpse was its outline as it lay concealed under a partly burned blanket. They buried the unfortunate trapper at the base of the southern side of Big Rock, and one of the trappers cut his name and the date of his death into the rock with his hunting-knife—a fitting monument to the rugged manhood lying at its base.

The moment Rex and Dill reached the ground, they hurried to the spring and slaked their burning thirst with long drafts of cool water. Then they were ready to give their attention to the on-coming trappers.

"Why, they look more like Indians than they do like white men!" Rex declared, as the wild looking knights of the mountains came dashing up to the Big Rock, yelling and flourishing their long rifles about their heads, and making no attempt to stop the headlong rush of their horses until they were almost upon our little party of trappers, when they

brought them to a halt with a suddenness that threw the animals back on their haunches, and, leaping from their saddles, crowded tumultuously around Captain Tom and his men.

And, indeed, Rex had not inaptly described these wild free men of the plains and the mountains when he declared they looked more like Indians than they did like whitemen. Many of them had lived in the wilderness for years, without even a glimpse of the rough civilization of the settlements, and all of them had been trapping for months, and, consequently, their equipments were in a picturesque condition of dilapidation.

They were dressed in long loose coats of deerskin, tied in front with leather thongs, deerskin trousers and leggins and Indian moccasins. On their heads were skin caps, usually with the tails of the animals from whose fur they were made hanging down behind. All of these garments were of their own rude manufacture; and their soiled and worn appearance spoke convincingly of the rough life their wearers had been living. Under the right arm of each swung his powder horn and bullet pouches, while the broad belt around his waist held his hunting-knife, sheathed in buffalo hide, a small hatchet, and a pocket-like buckskin case containing a whetstone, spare flints, steel, an awl for mending purposes, and various little odds and ends. Their long-barreled rifles were held in their hands, where they would be ready for instant use.

Did you ever stop to think, boys, how much America, your country owes to these same long-barreled rifles? They protected the lives and fed and clothed the bodies of the pioneers, the hunters and the trappers, as they tracked the way for civilization from the Atlantic to the Pacific. When they needed food, they shot it with their rifles. When they required clothing, they found it on the backs of animals they killed with their rifles. When their lives were threatened by wild beasts or wild Indians, again it was their rifles that killed or drove off the beasts or the Indians and protected their lives. With this rifle in his hand, the American pioneer was independent, having the wherewithal to feed and cloth his body and to protect his life, and dared go anywhere; without it he would have been helpless on the great plains and in the mountains and woods. Rifleless he could not have existed a week in the wilderness.

Now this same long-barreled rifle, this provider and protector of our forefathers, this pronouncer of the doom of savagery and the herald of civilization, is, as all things must be some day, an ancient thing, relegated to the museum and the garret. Doubtless, even, many of the boys who read this story never saw one of these "ancient" weapons, and have at best but an inadequate picture in their minds of the gun itself, when they read of the long-barreled rifles of the trappers; and for such, in order that they may know just what sort of a weapon Rex

and Dill and their good friends, the trappers, carried, that they may know what this protector and provider of the wilderness looked like, a brief pen picture of the "ancient" weapon is here given.

Take, for the illustration, the rifle of Hammer Jones. It was a good rifle, of that you may be sure, and typical of all the rifles of that period. The barrel was a little over four feet long, thick and heavy, and the stock strongly curved downward, so that the sights came up to the level of the eye easily and quickly. A brass patch-box was set in the right hand side of the stock, in which Ham kept the little pieces of greased cloth or other material, which he wrapped around the bullets to make them fit the bore tightly before he rammed them down the barrel. The lock was a flint-lock, that is it was fired by sparks struck from a small piece of flint held by the hammer. The sights hugged the barrel closely, the fore sight being made of silver and shaped something like a crescent, and the rear sight consisting of a flat finely notched bar twelve inches from the breech of the barrel. Beneath the lock was a delicately arranged set-trigger, that enabled the gun to be fired with so slight a pressure that the aim was not disturbed in the least. The ball was round and small, some forty to the pound. The ramrod, which Ham himself had whittled out with the utmost care from a straight-grained piece of hickory wood, was carried in metal pipes fastened

to the long wooden stock that extended under the barrel almost to the muzzle.

Such, then, was the appearance of this famous long-barreled rifle of the western trappers, a weapon of deadly accuracy in skilled hands.

For a few minutes after the meeting of the two bands of trappers there was so much excitement and confusion, so much congratulatory hand shaking and clapping on the backs, so many questions to be asked and answered, that Rex and Dill had no thoughts for anything else; but, presently the excitement began to quiet down, and then both boys turned eagerly to Hammer Jones.

"Is Kit Carson with them?" Rex asked, his eyes searching anxiously the bronzed faces of the trappers.

"No," Ham replied. "If Kit had been with them we'd a-heard from him afore now."

"But," broke in Dill eagerly, "some of them may know where we can find him."

"That might be," assented Ham. "An' if any on 'em knows whar Kit is, 'twill be Jim Bridger. Come 'long; we'll ask Jim," and, followed by the two anxious boys, Ham started to where Bridger stood talking with Captain Tom.

Jim Bridger at this date, he was only twenty-eight years old, had not yet reached the fullness of his after fame as a trapper, hunter, scout, Indian fighter and guide; but he was already known among

the hardy veterans of the mountains and the plains, where leadership could be won only by fearlessness and skill, as one of the boldest and most successful of the leaders of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

"Here are tew boys from New O'leans, Jim, who are mighty anxious tew find Kit Carson," Ham announced, as he and the boys reached the place where the two leaders of the trappers stood talking; "an' I told 'em you was th' man tew come tew for that kind of information."

"Yes," explained Captain Tom, "we've been sent out by Captain Young to find Kit Carson for these boys. They've got a message for him from Noel Conroyal. Maybe you knowed Con, Jim? One of the lads is Con's boy, Dill, and the other is his nephew, Rex Holt," and Captain Tom pointed to each boy as he mentioned his name.

"Know Con—Conroyal? Wal, I reckon I do!" and Bridger caught hold of Dill's hand and shook it warmly. "An' mighty glad I am tew see his boy an' nephey," and he grabbed the hand of Rex. "On th' hunt fer Kit Carson, be you? Wal, Kit's trappin' sumwhar 'long th' head waters of th' Missoury; but only th' good Lord could tell whar tew find him afore th' rendezvous next summer. Kit's sartin tew be thar. So I reckon th' best thing fer you tew do," and he turned to Captain Tom, "is tew j'in us. We're on our way tew winter quarters 'bout fifty miles further up th' Sweetwater, an' we'll be powerful pleased tew have you an' yer men go 'long with

us, an' spend th' winter thar with us in our winter quarters."

For a minute or two Captain Tom studied the situation before answering, then he turned to Bridger.

"Thank you, Jim," he said. "We will go 'long with you. Now let's see what the fire and the Indians have left us," and he turned to examine what remained of the little fort and its contents.

The two tents had been burnt to the ground and about half of the blankets had been ruined. The mule-packs and the furs they had caught had been piled in one of the tents, and over these had been thrown the dozen or more buffalo skins, taken from the animals they had killed during the great buffalo hunt. The heat had spoiled nearly all the buffalo skins; but the packs and furs were almost uninjured. The Indians, apparently, had touched nothing, doubtless on account of their fear of the rifles on the top of Big Rock.

Rex and Dill, with Pom by their sides, were looking anxiously through the pile of packs for their own pack, to see if all their belongings were safe, when Pom, who was helping them move some of the packs, suddenly straightened up with a wild yell of terror and went sprawling backward over a pile of beaver furs. At the same moment the pack that Pom had been about to lift was pushed aside, and with a glad whine, Buster, the grizzly bear cub, rushed to the side of Rex.

Both boys welcomed the animal with a glad shout, and Rex threw his arms around the shaggy neck and hugged him tightly, Buster showing his joy in his own bearish way; for the bear had become very dear to Rex, especially since he had saved White Cloud from the Blackfoot Indian.

"Now, if I only had White Cloud back," Rex said, as he straightened up, "if I only had White Cloud back, I'd be a happy boy. I don't believe I can ever find another horse like White Cloud; and —and he was just getting so that he knew and liked me," and the boy's voice trembled and tears came into his eyes as he thought of White Otter's noble gift.

But White Cloud, together with all the other horses and mules of our trappers, had vanished with the Indians.

CHAPTER XIV

WINTER QUARTERS

THE Indians still occupied the pass in the north end of the valley; but Bridger and his trappers had traveled all night, in their haste to get to the valley; and, now that they had rescued Captain Tom and his men, they felt more like sleeping than they did like fighting; and so no move was made to dislodge the Blackfeet.

"If they're thar in th' mornin', we'll git after them," Jim Bridger said. "But, if I know Blackfoot nater, they've had all th' fight they want, an' thar won't be one on 'em within twenty miles of har by tew-morrow's sunup. Now we'll jest git all th' sleep we can an' be ready tew git out of har tew-morrer."

Accordingly guards were stationed, and the tired trappers stretched themselves out on their blankets; and soon forgot their weariness and battles in sleep.

Rex and Dill, it will be remembered that they, too, had passed a sleepless night, now that the excitement was over, found it next to impossible to keep their tired eyes open, and, in a short time they followed the example of the trappers, and were soon away from all their hardships and dangers in the

pleasant Land of Dreams. And so wearied in bodies and minds were the two boys that they slept soundly all through the remainder of that day and the following night, and never once woke up, until the sun of the next day was beginning to lighten the tops of the eastern mountains.

It was still quite dark when Rex jumped out of his blanket the next morning and hurried to the pond to wash his face and hands. As he bent over the water he heard the distant nicker of a horse, coming from toward the north end of the pond, away from where the horses of the trappers were corralled.

"It must be a horse that has escaped from the Indians," thought Rex, as he straightened up and looked in the direction of the sound.

At first he could see nothing. Then, as his eyes became more accustomed to the morning light, he saw, standing on a little knoll, about twenty rods away, near the north end of the pond, the dim outline of a horse. At the first glimpse of the horse something familiar in the way the animal stood caused the blood to jump in the boy's veins; and the next moment he was racing madly toward the knoll; and two minutes later his arms were around the neck of White Cloud, and he was laughing and shouting, yes, and crying, at least there were tears in his eyes, while White Cloud was rubbing his nose softly against his young master and in other horseways was trying to show how pleased he was to see

him. In a few minutes more a crowd of excited trappers had gathered around Rex and White Cloud; and, when it was discovered that the horse had been fastened by a rope around his neck to a picket firmly driven into the ground, showing that the beautiful animal had been purposely left by the Indians, their astonishment was very great; and Rex had an intensely interested audience, as he told Jim Bridger and his trappers how he had rescued the Blackfoot chief, White Otter, from the Buffalo bull, at the sacrifice of his horse, and how the young chief had given him White Cloud to replace the horse he had lost, and how, doubtless, it was he who had now returned the beautiful animal to him again.

"An' thar's th' chief's sign manuel," supplemented Hammer Jones, as he stepped up to White Cloud and laid his hand on an otter skin firmly tied to the hair of the horse's mane. "Now, I reckon, that thar Ingine otter have been born white."

Rex was a very happy boy as he led White Cloud back to camp and picketed him near the Big Rock.

As soon as it became daylight scouts were sent out to see if the Indians were still in the pass at the north end of the valley. They found that Jim Bridger had proved a true prophet; for not an Indian was to be found anywhere. They had fled during the darkness of the night, and were now, doubtless, many miles away.

On the return of the scouts orders were at once given to break camp; and, in a quarter of an hour,

the long cavalcade of trappers was riding slowly out of the Valley of the Big Rock, on its way to winter quarters.

Bridger and his trappers had very nearly evened matters up with the Indians for our friends in the way of horse-flesh; for they had captured forty sturdy little ponies from the Blackfeet; and these, with the hearty generosity of the West, they had given to Captain Tom and his trappers to replace the horses and mules they had lost, so that all had horses to ride and to carry their packs.

It was now the last of September, and in that region the first week in October often saw a heavy fall of snow that would make the mountains almost impassable to man and beast. Consequently Jim Bridger was anxious to get the brigade of trappers in the neighborhood of the place where they expected to go into camp for the winter as soon as possible. Once there, they could trap through the surrounding country, until the rigors of winter forced them to desist, when they would be prepared to go into permanent camp and make themselves comfortable for the winter.

Rex and Dill, before passing through the narrows in the lower end of the valley, turned in their saddles for a last look at the scene of their battle with the fierce Blackfeet warriors. All now looked serene and peaceful. The placid waters of the pond shone like a mirror in the bright rays of the morning sun. The blackened path of the fire, and

the ruins of the little fort around the Big Rock alone spoke of the fierce conflict that had raged there but a few hours before. As their eyes rested on the Big Rock the hearts of both boys saddened; for there at its base they had left a comrade in his lonely grave. And yet they could but feel that the trapper had found a most fitting resting-place, with the huge rock, an everlasting monument, towering above his body, in the midst of a beautiful valley, surrounded by the mountains that he had loved so well; and both lads felt like saying amen to the words of Ham, as the big trapper turned for a last look at the grave of his comrade.

"I reckon that's 'bout th' spot Dan would have picked out, thar by the side of that great rock, whar th' mountains'll be all around him, if he could have had his ch'ice," he said, as his eyes grew pensive. "Dan always did love th' mountains. But 'tain't no use spec'latin' on th' feelin' of th' dead," and he resolutely turned his head away from the Big Rock and the lonely grave of the trapper.

All that day and all the next day Bridger led his trappers up the valley of the Sweetwater, and then on the morning of the third day he turned aside from the river, passed through the southern spur of the Bighorn Mountains, and about the middle of the afternoon of that day came to a large but secluded valley, sheltered from the storms of winter by the lofty peaks of the Wind River Mountains on the west and the rugged walls of the lofty Bighorn

Mountains on the north and east. A stream of water that the trappers called Elk Creek, flowed through the center of the valley, the ground was covered with a thick carpet of grass, and here and there over its surface and along the shores of the rivulet were little groves of trees. An abundance of water, wood and grass, protection from the fiercest blasts of the winter's storms—Jim Bridger had chosen well the place for his winter encampment, for this was the valley where he had elected to make his winter quarters.

That night the weather turned cold, so cold that in the morning ice an inch thick covered a small beaver pond near the spot where they had pitched camp, and the distant tops of the Wind River Mountains were white with new-fallen snow.

"I reckon we got here jest in time," Ham said, as he and the two boys stood looking at the snow-covered mountains that morning. "Them clouds hangin' round th' mountain tops means more snow an' th' air's got th' feel of winter in it. But I reckon we can make ourselves mighty comfortable here;" and his eyes glanced around the valley. "We'll git right tew work an' build us a snug little house, as soon as Jim an' Captain Tom have decided jest whar tew make th' permanent camp."

Captain Tom and Jim Bridger spent the morning looking the valley over for the best place to make their winter camp; and finally decided on a little grove of trees, some ten acres in extent, that covered

the rounded top of a small hill. A spring of water bubbled up from a depression near the top of this hill and wound its way down to the waters of Elk Creek, not more than twenty rods away, while the surrounding valley, for a distance of a couple of hundred yards or more, presented no shelter that might be used by an enemy to protect them in an attack on the camp, a possibility that our trappers must never overlook.

The next three days all were busy getting the camp in shape for the winter. A space some ten rods square was cleared near the center of the little woods; and along the north and east sides of this little opening the trappers built their huts from the logs of the trees which their sharp axes cut down, thatching them with long strips of bark weighted down with poles. Along the west side of the opening they built a long covered shed, to protect their animals from the cold and the snow. The enclosure of the opening was completed by building a strong wall of logs six feet high along the south side, a large gate being made in this wall through which the horses could be driven to and from their pasture. A strong fence, running diagonally from the northwest corner to the southeast corner, divided the enclosure into two parts, the part containing the shed being, of course, for the horses, and the other for the use of the men; for it would be necessary to corral and guard the horses every night to protect them from the bears and the mountain lions as

well as from thieving Indians, and it would not do to give the animals the full liberty of the enclosure, hence the fence separating the camp of the men from the corral of the horses. Loopholes, about six feet apart, were made through the walls all around the enclosure, so that in case of an attack by the Indians the encampment could be quickly transformed into a fort.

When this had all been done there was left only a thin fringe of surrounding trees, through which, when cleared of all underbrush and stumps and logs, the valley beyond could be clearly seen, and which, even should they succeed in reaching it, would give attacking Indians but little protection.

Thus the camp was speedily put into condition, not only to protect our trappers from the cold and the storms of winter, but also to guard against any possible attack by the Indians.

These had been intensely interesting and busy days for Rex and Dill. There was their own log hut to build and to make as comfortable as possible for the winter. In this they were assisted by Hammer Jones and Rad Dawson and Pom, who were to be their camp mates; and both lads had worked with unfaltering enthusiasm until their little house, with its skin-covered sleeping bunks of sweet-scented balsam boughs, its smooth dirt floor, its chunks of logs for chairs, its tight walls of logs and roof of bark, really did look very comfortable and cozy, especially at night time when a crackling fire

was blazing in the center of its one room, the sparks and smoke shooting upward through a small hole made in the center of the roof and its ruddy light glowing warmly on the faces of the occupants and on the rough log walls of the cabin. And then there was the pride of personal achievement and ownership in all this. They had helped to make the house with their own hands, and it was theirs.

"I don't suppose mother and the girls would think this much for comfort," Dill said, when at last the hut was completed near the close of the third day, as he lifted the bearskin door and looked in; "but really, I don't see how we could wish for anything more comfortable and cozy than this."

"We don't!" was the emphatic rejoinder of Rex. "If by just waving my hand I could replace this little house that we have helped to make with our own hands, with one of the best houses in New Orleans, I would not make the wave. It would not seem natural or right to live any other way than this, with these great silent mountains standing guard all around us. I am perfectly satisfied with our house just as it is; and I think it is going to be great living here all winter long, with nothing to do but just to enjoy ourselves."

"Jest a winter picnic," laughed Ham, who was standing near. "But, I reckon, 'twon't be all playin' an' no workin'. 'Twill take considerable meat tew feed all these mouths, which means a lot of trampin' over these mountains a-lookin' for it."

"But that means hunting buffalos, and deer, and bears, and mountain sheep, and other things," broke in Rex his eyes sparkling. "And who would ever think of hunting as working?"

"Wal," and again Ham laughed, "I'm powerful glad tew see you yunks a-tryin' tew make th' best of a mighty good thing. Accordin' tew my notion thar ain't no kind of livin' anywhar else that jest measures right up tew th' bigness of living wild-like in these here mountains. Now, whar else on arth could you see a picter th' equal of that?" and Ham pointed with one hand across the valley to where the sun was sinking in a red glory of clouds behind the distant snow-covered peaks of the Wind River Mountains.

And, indeed, it was a wonderful and glorious scene toward which the hand of Ham was pointing and the eyes of all were looking. Flanked on either side by masses of storm clouds, the sun hung just above a particularly wild and rugged mountain peak, glowing like a mighty beacon-fire, and coloring with the magic brush of its rays the flanking storm clouds until the glory of their blending hues was beyond the power of words to picture, and transforming the snow- and ice-covered peak into an iridescent jeweled point, sparkling with diamonds and glowing with rubies and topazes and opalescent with pearls.

" 'Pears like de good Lo'd hab done throwed open de golden gates ob hebben, jes' fo' to gib us a

glimpse ob de glories beyond," Pom said reverently, his eyes on the wondrous scene.

And everyone of those rugged trappers felt like saying amen to the sentiment expressed in the negro boy's homely words.

The next morning, when Rex and Dill opened their eyes, there seemed to be an unwonted stillness in the air outside, as if all nature were asleep. Even the noises made by the horses, moving uneasily in their shed, had a far-off muffled sound, as if many heavy blankets had been hung between them and the horse corral during the night. For a few minutes, the two boys lay wondering what the unusual silence meant; then Rex threw off his bearskin comforters, and, jumping out of his bunk, hurried to the doorway, and, pulling aside the heavy grizzly bear skin that did duty for a door, looked out.

"Hurrah!" he yelled, the moment his eyes caught sight of the scene outside. "Everything is covered with snow; and the snow is falling so thick that it looks as if the air was just made out of great white snowflakes. Why, I can't see even a sign of the horse corral! I must get out into it, and see how White Cloud is faring," and he hastened back to his bunk to slip on his outdoor clothing.

Rex and Dill had been born in New Orleans and had always lived in New Orleans; and this expedition in search of Kit Carson was their first venture into the northlands of cold and ice and snow. Consequently this was the first big snow storm that the

lads had ever seen, the first time they had ever been able to wade and plunge and tumble about, as boys will ever delight in doing, in the pure white snow-flakes, piled nearly a foot deep over everything, and for a time, both lads were wild with the delightful novelty of playing in the new-fallen snow, and watching the thick falling flakes.

The snow was damp and packed easily; and the moment Ham and Rad Dawson stepped outside of the hut they were saluted with rapid volleys of snow-balls and whoops of delight from the two boys. The challenge to battle was promptly accepted by the two men; and, in a moment more, snowballs were flying furiously in every direction, while the yells of the contestants awoke every one in camp.

As fast as they could dress the trappers rushed outdoors; and, as soon as one of them appeared, he was greeted with a volley of snowballs that sent him scurrying to the protection of either one side or the other of the snow-fighters. In a very few minutes at least a hundred men had joined in the snow-fight, and a battle royal was raging all over the en-closure, while the air was filled with the exultant yells of the trappers as their snowballs crashed against the bodies of one another. Like a lot of joyous schoolboys out on a winter's frolic, they fought, always good-naturedly, now hurling volleys of snowballs, now rushing to close quarters, when they struggled each to throw and wash the face of the other. Noses and eyes were thumped with

balls, ears were filled and necks were jammed with snow; but still the battle went riotously on, until at last the merry spirit of frolic was satisfied, and the great snow-fight was over.

Rex and Dill had been in the hottest of the fray. Where the snowballs flew thickest, where the struggling crowd of trappers was the densest, there in the very midst the boys were sure to be; and, when at last the great fight was done, the two lads were not without their "honorable wounds" to show how bravely they had fought. The right eye of Rex was red and just a little swollen, likewise his left cheek, and both ears were full of snow, while a trickling stream of water running down his back gave warning that his neck needed shoveling out. Dill had fared no better. His nose was bleeding from a snowball that had landed on its end, and both cheeks were red from the severe snow-washing Ham had given them, while his hair and ears and neck were "chuck" full of snow and his clothing was covered with snow. But both boys had enjoyed themselves immensely, and what did their little hurts matter?

"My, but wasn't it fun?" Rex declared, as he dug the snow out of the back of his neck. "I wish they had big snow storms in New Orleans. Wouldn't we boys have fun fighting snow battles?"

"You bet!" Dill agreed enthusiastically. "But, say, what has become of Pom? I don't remember seeing him in the fight."

"He wasn't there, the black rascal! But we'll give him his winter baptism just the same, as sure as his name is Napolyun Bonapart Jerusal'm Jones. Come on," and Rex, followed by Dill, dove through the doorway of their hut.

At first they could see nothing of Pom, but at last Rex spied one of his feet sticking out from under a pile of bear and buffalo skins in one corner of the room; and the next moment both boys had grabbed hold of the foot, and, with yells of triumph, were dragging Pom, clutching to the skins, across the floor and out into the snow where he was duly "baptized," spluttering and blowing and kicking and protesting with all of his black might, but not for an instant losing his temper nor an opportunity to get back at Rex and Dill with a handful of snow.

This ended the day's frolic, and soon all were busy with the camp-work. The breakfast was cooked and eaten, wood for the fires was cut and carried to the huts, the horses were taken out to their pastures to dig for grass under the snow, while a party of hunters, on rudely-fashioned snow-shoes, started out for the day's hunt, when about ten o'clock the clouds lifted and the snow ceased falling. There were now one hundred and sixty-seven mouths to be fed in the encampment; and these would require many buffalos and deer and bears and mountain sheep and goats and large quantities of smaller game to supply all their needs

before the winter was over; and each day that the weather permitted, the hunters must go out.

When the hunters returned that night they brought in eight deer, the meat of two buffalos and a young bear, a couple of dozen of mountain grouse, and, best of all, reported a large herd of buffalos in a valley about ten miles to the southeast.

The apparent abundance of game in the region about the encampment and especially the news that a large herd of buffalos were so near, caused great rejoicing in camp; for, of all the perils of winter camping in the mountains, scarcity of food was the one most dreaded by the trappers, and many harrowing tales were told of the sufferings of bands of trappers, imprisoned by the snows of winter in some lonely mountain valley where there was little or no game to be killed, and who, consequently, nearly perished of starvation before the warmth of the coming spring opened their prison gates.

"We'll git after th' buffalos tew-morrer," Jim Bridger declared, "an' git in our winter's supply of meat. It's bound to turn cold after this storm, an' th' meat'll keep without jerkin'."

That night a space was cleared of snow in front of the row of huts and a large camp-fire built in celebration of the finding of the herd of buffalos. The hardy trappers gathered around the fires, and feasted and smoked and told stories, until compelled by the lateness of the hour to go to their bunks in

order to get the sleep and rest they needed for the morrow's hunt.

"Say, but isn't this life great fun?" Rex queried, as he and Dill crawled under the soft buffalo and bear skins in their bunk. "There is something interesting to be seen or done all the time; and the outdoor life makes a fellow feel so—so bully that he is ready to get all the fun there is out of everything."

"Yes," assented Dill. "I don't believe I will ever want to live in a crowded city again. I wonder if Jim Bridger and Captain Tom will let us go on the buffalo hunt to-morrow?"

"Of course they will," affirmed Rex. "So we must get to sleep so as to be ready in the morning. Good night," and in five minutes the eyes of both lads were fast closed in sleep.

CHAPTER XV

FILLING THE LARDER

DURING the night the weather turned bitterly cold, and morning found the waters of the beaver pond frozen so thick that the ice would bear the weight of a horse, while Elk Creek itself was ice-bound, except where the water ran very swiftly. This hard freeze would put an end to all beaver trapping for the winter; and the trappers could now settle down in their winter camp and make themselves as comfortable as possible.

Jim Bridger and Captain Tom selected fifty men to go on the great buffalo hunt. The hunters were divided into two parties of twenty-five men each, so as to approach the buffalos from two different points. Jim Bridger himself commanded one of these bands of hunters, while Captain Tom was chosen to lead the other, and with him went two very happy boys, Rex and Dill. In addition to the horse he rode, each hunter lead an extra horse, to be used to carry the buffalo meat back to camp.

The start was made a little after sunrise, both parties riding together until they came within a couple of miles of the valley where the buffalos had been seen the day before. Here Jim Bridger and

his men turned into a ravine that would bring them unseen to the other side of the herd of buffalos and rode off, while Captain Tom and his hunters halted for an hour, to give Bridger time to reach his position, and then rode slowly on toward the valley.

As Captain Tom and his men drew near the valley, the excitement among the hunters increased; for, if the buffalos were still there, there would be not only great sport for all, but, in addition they hoped to secure in that one great hunt sufficient meat to last them all winter, and that meant the solving of their most difficult problem at the very beginning of their winter encampment. Then, too, there had sprung up between the two bands of hunters a spirit of generous rivalry; and each company was to strive to outdo the other in the number of buffalos killed during the day, the losing side to forfeit to each man of the other side a prime beaver skin.

At last they came within sight of the valley; and, to their great satisfaction, saw that the herd of buffalos were still there, stamping and pawing the snow in search of the grass beneath it.

The pack-horses were now tied in a little grove of trees and left with a couple of men to guard them; and the rest prepared themselves for the hunt.

The valley, where the buffalos were, was some four miles long but not more than a mile wide. The plan agreed upon was for Captain Tom to wait at his end of the valley until Bridger had reached

the opposite end. Then the party of hunters nearest to whom the buffalos were feeding was to charge, thus driving the animals directly toward the other band of hunters.

"It's Bridger's first move," Captain Tom said, as he brought his little company to a halt in his end of the valley. "The critters are a good mile nearer t'other end of the valley. We'll wait right here 'til Bridger starts the fun. 'Twon't be long. Every man be ready to start on the jump, when I yell."

Captain Tom was right. They did not have long to wait. In less than ten minutes a great wave of excitement ran through the herd; and, in another minute, every buffalo was headed in their direction and plunging through the snow as swiftly as fear could drive his big body.

"Be mighty careful not to get caught in the press of the herd," cautioned Captain Tom. "If we can't turn the critters, then turn your horses and run with them. Let the old bulls go, and get all the young heifers you can—Now! At them!" he yelled, striking his horse with his whip and bounding away in the direction of the rapidly advancing herd of buffalos, followed by his men, all yelling at the top of their voices.

This was Rex's first buffalo hunt on the back of White Cloud, and he was just a little anxious to know how the noble animal would behave; but, before he had ridden a dozen rods toward the oncoming buffalos, he knew by the actions of his horse

that he had hunted buffalos before, and all his anxiety vanished.

"Hurrah!" he shouted to Dill, who rode not a rod away. "He's an old buffalo hunter! A beaver's skin to a muskrat's, that we kill more buffalos than do Bridger's men!"

"No takers here!" yelled back Dill; and then both boys gave their attention to the herd of buffalos that now was thundering down upon them.

There were, perhaps, a thousand buffalos in the herd, and all these animals, wild with fear, were plunging straight toward our little party of hunters. the front ranks throwing up clouds of snow like enormous snowplows. For a width of some five rods the front of the herd was densely packed, the buffalos crowding together, until horns clashed against horns and heaving sides pushed against heaving sides; but on either side of this denser mass the herd thinned until along the outskirts the buffalos were running in scattered groups.

At first Captain Tom and his hunters rode straight toward the thickest of the mass of oncoming buffalos, yelling and swinging their caps, in an effort to turn back the frightened animals; but, soon seeing that it would be impossible to change the course of the maddened herd, they swung their horses swiftly to the right and to the left and joined in the tumultuous chase. Then the slaughter began. Now above the thunders of hoofs and clashing horns and bellowing bulls, the sharp crack—

crack—crack of pistols beat a rapid tattoo on the ear drums; and soon the white level of the little valley was dotted with the dark bodies of dead and dying buffalos.

White Cloud that day proved himself a wonderful buffalo hunter. He needed little guidance. All that Rex had to do was to start him toward the animal wanted; and soon the swift and tireless legs would place him in exactly the best position for a fatal shot, and keep him there until the buffalo was down, his eyes in the meantime watching every movement of the animal, ready to leap to one side the instant the horns were turned in his direction.

It took four shots for Rex, who was considerably excited, to kill his first buffalo, but the next one he killed in three shots, and, to his delight, the third buffalo went down at the first crack of his pistol. Twice he was charged by bulls; but so long as he was safe on the back of White Cloud, he could laugh at all the charging bulls in the herd.

Dill was not so fortunate. His horse, in the excitement of the chase, became almost unmanageable, and he succeeded in killing only one buffalo, although he wounded two others.

For nearly an hour the hunters followed the herd; and then Bridger, seeing that the horses were almost completely exhausted, called the hunt off; and the counting of the victims, to see which side had won the hunt, began.

Identification marks had been agreed upon, so

that there would be no trouble in telling to which party of hunters the dead buffalo belonged. A slit in the right ear showed that the animal had been killed by one of Bridger's men; and, if the top of the left ear had been cut off, it meant that the buffalo had been slain by one of Captain Tom's hunters. Jim Bridger and Captain Tom themselves did the tallying; and, at the end of the count, it was found that two hundred and seventy-four buffalos had been killed.

Wild cheers greeted the announcement of this number, for it meant that now their winter's larder was full to overflowing.

"Who's won th' beaver skins? That's what we want to know," yelled one of the men impatiently, and the cheering stopped and all waited anxiously for Jim Bridger's answer.

"They got us, boys, by jest tew buffalos," and Jim Bridger took off his cap and bowed to Captain Tom.

Then how Rex and Dill and the rest of Captain Tom's party of hunters did cheer!

But, now that the hunt was over, the meat had to be secured, and this, as you can easily surmise, meant a great deal of very hard work. Ropes, fastened to the pommels of the saddles, were tied to the horns of the dead buffalos and their carcasses dragged by the horses to a little grove of trees, near the center of the field of slaughter, where the bodies

were to be skinned and dressed and the meat cut up ready for transportation to camp.

There was no returning to camp that night; but messengers, bearing the news of their good fortune, had been sent back; and the next morning seventy-five more men, with the rest of the horses, came to assist in the butchering; and by night all the meat and skins had been safely transported to their winter camp in the little grove of trees, and stored in a strong shed especially built for that purpose, where the cold would preserve it until used.

CHAPTER XVI

ROUND THE CAMP-FIRE

NOW followed days of wild and picturesque enjoyment and contentment for Rex and Dill. They were encamped in the heart of the wilderness, surrounded by all the grandeur and wildness of untamed nature. They had an abundance of the most wholesome food to eat, plenty of wood to burn to keep them warm and to cook their meals, and a house to shelter them from the cold and the storms of winter. Their time was passed in the midst of rude and bustling scenes of picturesque activities. The trappers were a hardy and a restless race of men, accustomed to the constant activities of outdoor life. They could not lounge idly in their huts, hugging the warmth of their fires. They must be out in the open air, doing something to work off the excess steam of their buoyant spirits, and something interesting or novel to the boys was always happening. The hunting parties continually sallying forth and returning; the little groups of men, always busy, scattered about the encampment, cooking, mending, making garments, wrestling, shooting, running races, or amusing themselves at different games; the frequent neighing of the horses,

contentedly feeding on the rich grass of the valley, the echoing strokes of the ax in the near-by woods, the sharp report of the rifle, the whoop and the halloo of the returning and the departing hunters, the frequent bursts of loud laughter and rude song, breaking the silence of the surrounding solitudes of valley and mountains—all these, happening in a region suddenly aroused from its primeval silence and loneliness, realized for Rex and Dill all they had ever dreamed of the wild freedom and romantic delights of a hunter's life in the Rocky Mountains.

And the nights were not less enjoyable than the days. Then the men gathered in groups around the blazing camp-fires, and, reclining on the soft skins of the buffalo or bear, lighted their pipes, and lived over again in stories the past scenes of their adventurous lives, or related tales of the daring and skill of the men who had won leadership among these bold mountaineers of the West. Especially on stormy nights, when the wind whistled and screamed outside and beat against the strong logs of their huts and bellied in and shook their bearskin doors and drove the snow and sleet down through the smoke-holes, did Rex and Dill delight in joining some group of trappers, seated in the glowing warmth and comfort of a blazing fire, their rifles stacked in a corner of the hut, their deerskin coats thrown open to admit the pleasant warmth, their bronzed faces shining in the ruddy glow of the firelight, their eyes glistening with animation and their

features working with the excitement of the tale that was telling—especially at such a time did Rex and Dill delight in joining the circle and in listening to their wild tales of daring and romantic enterprise, of savage ambuscades, covert lurkings, and midnight alarms, of the hunt and the foray, of fights with wild beast and wild men, of weird beings that dwelt in the mysteries of the mountains, and of all the perils and superstitions and wonders of these hardy men of the mountains and the plains. There was something in the darkness and the wildness of the storm outside in contrast to the warmth and comfort within, that seemed to give an added vividness, a surer reality, to the tale that was telling.

Among the trappers in Bridger's party there were many men who had hunted and trapped and fought Indians with Kit Carson, and frequently he was the hero of the tales told around the fires at night. Then, indeed, were Rex and Dill enchanted; for Kit Carson was their hero, their beau-ideal of all that a hunter, trapper and Indian fighter should be. He was the man they had come across a thousand miles of wilderness to find, the friend of Dill's father and of his dead Uncle Manuel. For a long time they had worshiped him from afar, as brave boys ever will worship the doer of brave deeds; but now they were in his country, were surrounded by his friends, and it all seemed to bring his personality nearer to them, and to make them the more anxious to hear all they could of the man who had won so high a

place in the regards of these bold knights of the Plains and the Mountains, the most fearless and hardy class of men that ever lived anywhere.

One stormy night—a mountain blizzard was howling outside—Jim Bridger, Captain Tom and an old trapper known as Steeltrap Smith came to call on Hammer Jones and Rad Dawson in their own hut. Rex and Dill never forgot that night; for almost the moment the men had seated themselves on the soft skins the boys had spread hospitably around the fire blazing in the center of the hut, Steeltrap Smith turned to the two boys.

"Wal, youngsteers, this ain't much like New O'leans weather, is it?" he queried, as he spread the palms of his hands out over the glowing coals. "Now, listen tew that wind. It's gittin' 'most powerful enough tew blow th' hump off a buffalo's back. Makes me think of th' blizzard we had th' winter we was camped on th' Arkansas River 'bout three years ago, th' time th' Crow Inguns got nine of our hosses, an' Kit Carson an' twelve on us got after th' Inguns. That were a mighty powerful blizzard. Why, it blew so hard that—"

"But, tell us about Kit Carson and the Indians," broke in Dill, too excited to remember his manners. "Did Kit Carson get the horses back? and did you have to fight the Indians?"

"Did Kit git th' hosses back? I reckon you don't know Kit Carson," and the old trapper smiled indulgently. "Kit always gits what he goes after,

whether it be Inguns or hosses; an' in this case it were both, for, after we'd got th' hosses, we jest had tew go back an' fite th' Inguns, jest tew sort o' impress on their minds th' sin of hoss stealin'."

"Do tell us all about it?" pleaded Rex. "We have never heard that story about Kit Carson, and we want to hear everything about him we can. We're here on purpose to find Kit Carson."

"Sartin, I'll tell you all 'bout it, bein' you're so interested in Kit; but I always likes tew begin a story on a full pipe," and the old trapper paused to fill and light his pipe. Then, after taking a few meditative puffs, he settled down comfortably on the furs and turned to the boys.

"This was th' way on it," he began. "I reckon th' blizzard made us sum careless; for 'bout two days after th' big storm a party of 'bout fifty Crow Inguns sneaked up tew our camp in th' dark of th' night an' got away with nine of our hosses, without our knowin' a thing 'bout it 'til th' next mornin'. That made Gaunt, Gaunt was captain of our company of trappers, madder'n a sick bear; an' he told Kit Carson tew take twelve of th' trappers an' git after them Crow thieves as fast as hoss legs could take him. Kit was always th' man sent when 'twas anything special dangerous.

"We wan't long in findin' th' trail of th' Crow thieves; but we'd gone only a few miles, when we comes tew whar a lot of buffalos had tramped all over it, an' we'd agin up tryin' tew follow it, if it

hadn't a-ben for Kit. I don't know how he done it, but Kit jest followed that trail, 'spite of all them buffalo tracks, an', of course, we followed Kit. Wal after we'd gone 'bout forty miles, our hosses, they was in poor flesh not havin' had much grass tew eat, began tew show signs of givin' out; an' so we thought 'twould be best tew go intew camp, jest as soon as we came tew sum timber that we seed a couple of miles ahead of us. But, jest afore we got tew th' woods, Kit, who was a leetle ahead, suddenly stopped his hoss an' motioned us tew stop sudden; an' then we seed smoke risin' above th' tops of th' trees an' knowed it must come from th' fires of th' Inguns. You bet th' sight of that smoke made our blood jump sum; but we was only thirteen an' th' Inguns was fifty; an' we knowed we'd got tew take them Inguns by surprise, or, maybe, git took ourselves; an' so we went intew hidin' 'til dark.

"Kit soon had everything all planned out; an', when it got proper dark, we left our hosses well hidden an' started for th' camp of them Crow thieves, everyone on us mighty anxious tew git a good lick at 'em. First we made a half circuit round their camp, so as tew approach them from th' opposite side, 'cause Kit thought they wouldn't be a-lookin' for danger from that direction much, an', cons'quently, wouldn't be a-guardin' that side careful. Then we began crawlin' up on th' Inguns, a-creepin' on our hands an' knees 'till we come in full view of th' camp; an' then we seed that th' reds

had made tew rough forts out of logs an' had divided intew tew parties. They was havin' a big dance a-cel'bratin' of their hoss stealin', an' we knowed from that that they didn't have th' least suspicion of our bein' near. Jest outside one of th' forts we seed our nine hosses, securely tied; an' th' sight riled our tempers so that sum on us wanted tew git after th' Inguns right then an' thar; but Kit Carson knowed th' Inguns was tew strong for any sech tactics tew succeed, an' he told us tew keep quiet 'til th' reds had tired themselves out dancin' an' laid down an' gone tew sleep, an' then we'd git tew work. So we jest crept back out of sight an' waited thar in th' cold an' th' snow, 'til them fool Inguns had jumped an' yelled themselves out an' laid down tew go tew sleep, an' then we got ready tew begin opperations, all th' madder because of th' cold an' th' long wait.

"First off we must git them hosses, an' we wanted tew git them without disturbin' th' Inguns; so Kit asked five on us tew go with him intew th' Ingun camp an' cut th' hosses loose. Kit never asked nobody tew go whar he wasn't willin' tew lead.

"Wal, I was one of th' five; an' I reckon I did feel sum scary, when we got 'most tew th' camp an' knowed that, if one of them bucks should wake an' give th' alarm thar'd be fifty howlin' Inguns down on us six afore we could do more'n pull th' trigger onct. But Kit Carson kept goin' right along, as

if them fifty sleepin' Inguns wan't nothin' more dangerous than logs of wood, 'til he gits intew camp; an', of course, th' rest on us followed him. Wal, we cut th' hosses loose, an' then drove them slowly out of camp by throwin' snowballs at them, without wakin' a durned Ingun, an' got them safely back tew whar th' rest of our men was waitin'.

"Now, seein' that we'd got our hosses back, sum on th' men was for quittin' an' gittin' back tew camp as fast as we could, seein' that th' Inguns were so strong in numbers an' pertected by forts; but Kit Carson wouldn't listen tew no sech talk. Th' Inguns had got tew be punished, so as tew larn 'em tew leave our hosses alone in th' future; an' Kit didn't care a durned whether thar was fifty or a hundred of th' red devils, he was for goin' back an' givin' 'em sum hot lead, even if he had tew go alone; an' of course, we couldn't let Kit go alone, so we all got ready tew go with him.

"Kit now ordered three of th' men tew take th' hosses we had recaptured back tew where we had left our saddle hosses, an' th' rest on us tew git ready for th' fite; an' then we started straight for th' Inguns. Jest afore we got tew th' first fort a cur began tew bark.

"'Ready, every man git ready!' called Kit, throwin' his rifle tew his shoulder, for he knowed th' dog would give th' alarm, an' th' time tew shoot would be when th' Inguns first jumped tew their

feet; an' almost th' moment he spoke, th' reds began poppin' up on their feet, dazed with sleep an' not knowin' whar th' danger was comin' from.

"'Fire!' yelled Kit, pullin' his own trigger; an' ten rifles blazed an' ten Inguns went down. We won't wastin' no bullets.

"Th' rest on th' reds made for th' other fort, an' got ahind its logs afore we could load; an' soon began shootin' at us, but we had got ahind trees whar we was pertected from the bullets.

"For an hour or so we shot back an' forth without either on us doin' much damage. Then it began tew git light, an' th' Inguns, seein' how few we was, thought they'd jest swallow us all down hull at one gulp; an' so, all of a sudden, they jumped out of th' fort an' made for us yellin' like they was goin' tew eat us alive, clothes an' all.

"'Wait, wait 'til you can git good aim,' cautioned Kit, cool as if th' yellin' Inguns was so many squakin' geese. Then, when they'd got jest whar he wanted 'em, he yelled: 'Give it tew 'em, boys!' an' we all fired; an' five of th' reds fell dead, an' th' rest on 'em got back intew their fort as sudden as their legs could take 'em.

"But them Inguns were mighty gritty, an' 'twon't long afore they came a-whoopin' after us ag'in, more determined than ever tew git our scalps; an', I reckon, they'd have got 'em, tew, this time, if we hadn't a-fell back jumpin' from tree tew tree an' gittin' in a shot whenever we could. 'Bout this

time th' three men Kit had sent with th' hosses got back an' we determined tew try ag'in tew stand our ground. When th' Inguns seed we wasn't fallin' back no more, but was a-gittin' ready tew give 'em a tussel, they gin up an' retreated tew their fort.

"I reckon both on us had had 'bout all th' fite we wanted by this time, leastwise, since we'd punished th' Inguns good an' plenty, we was satisfied, an' so we took th' back trail for camp, feelin' mighty good over th' way we'd got th' hosses back an' punished th' Inguns, without th' loss of a man, though sum on 'em got a few scratches. I tell you, boys, when it comes tew fitin' Inguns, Kit Carson's better than a regiment of soldiers an' a gineral," and the trapper's eyes sparkled.

"How—how many of th' Indians did you kill?" Dill asked, with all a boy's thirst for details.

"I don't know exactly," the trapper replied; "but I reckon 'twas a good twenty. I seed Kit git five on 'em with my own eyes; but then I never knowed another man as quick an' dead-sure with a rifle as Kit Carson."

"That's whar yer dead right," broke in Jim Bridger. "I've knowed sum mighty good rifle shots, but I never knowed one quicker or surer than Kit. Did you ever hear tell how Kit got th' big Injun that stole Robidoux's hosses?—No—Wal, that was whar Kit owed his life tew his good shootin'; an' he was on hossback, tew, an' his hoss was a-goin' at full gallop."

"O, please do tell us!" begged Dill excitedly. "Please tell us how he killed the big Indian."

"Wal," grinned Bridger, "if I don't tell it tew you now, I know you boys won't give me no rest 'til I do, seein' it's 'bout yer friend Kit Carson, so I'll jest give it tew you right on th' spot."

"Bully for you!" Rex declared, hitching himself up nearer to Bridger.

All laughed; and Jim Bridger filled his pipe with fresh tobacco, and sat for a few minutes listening to the howlings of the storm outside and contentedly puffing on his pipe, then, with a sly wink at Ham, he turned to Rex and Dill.

"This sure is a regler Rocky Mountain blizzard," he said, "an' I shouldn't be s'prised if 'twar cold enough by tew-morrer night tew freeze bilin' coffee. Onct when we war camped up on th' Snake River—"

"But, the story!" broke in Dill excitedly. "You promised to tell us how Kit Carson killed the big Indian!"

"Now don't git tew rambunctuous," grinned Bridger. "I was jest a-comin' tew that. As I was sayin', it war while Kit was in winter camp on th' Winty River, 'long with Captain Lee an' Robidoux, that a big buck Injun, strong as a buffalo bull, an' brave an' cunnin', an' mighty quick an' sure with a rifle, who was workin' for Robidoux, vamosed one dark night with six of Robidoux's best hosses; an', as each one of th' hosses was worth 'bout two

hundred dollars, th' deal riled th' temper of Robidoux 'till he was madder'n a wounded grizzly, an', as as soon as he had got done swearin', he started for th' camp of Captain Lee, whar Kit Carson was, tew git him tew go after th' Injun.

"Kit knowed th' Injun, knowed that 'twould be a fite tew th' death, afore he'd give up th' hosses, an' that th' Injun was 'bout th' toughest man tew tackle, white or red, in th' Rocky Mountains; but that didn't make no difference tew Kit. He was willin' tew go; an', in ten minutes, he was on his hoss's back, fully-armed and ready tew git after that Injun.

"A village of the Utah Tribe of Injuns was camped near by, an' Kit rode straight tew this village, after one of th' warriors, that he knowed, tew go with him. Th' savage was as ready for th' adventure as was Kit; an', in a few minutes, he was mounted on his war-hoss, an' th' two men galloped off tew find th' trail of th' robber. This wan't difficult for eyes as 'customed tew trailin' as war th' eyes of Kit an' his Injun friend; an' they was soon on th' trail, gallopin' 'long as fast as they could make their hosses go.

"For 'bout a hundred miles they rode, without onct havin' lost sight of th' trail, when th' Injun's hoss suddenly took sick an' gin out completely. Of course that meant th' Injun would have tew quit, an' that Kit would have tew give up th' chase, or go on alone. But 'tain't Kit's nater tew give up

anything, so long as he's got a fightin' chance, an', 'though he knowed 'twould be kill th' Injun or git killed, with th' advantage all in favor of th' Injun, he didn't hesitate, but said good-by tew th' Injun an' rode on alone 'long th' trail of th' desperado.

"Now, 'twan't more'n thirty miles from whar Kit had left his Injun friend, which shows he'd done sum mighty fast trailin', when he caught sight of th' hoss thief. Th' savage 'bout th' same time saw Kit, an' knowed 'twas kill or git killed. When they first saw each other they was on th' open plain; but a leetle ahead of th' Injun was a grove of trees, an' he knowed, if he could git tew them trees, he'd have Kit at his mercy, seein' that he could hide ahind a tree an' shoot him afore Kit could git a crack at him. 'Twas a mighty good plan; an' Kit knowed it as well as did th' Injun, but it only made him rush his hoss th' harder. He had come after that Injun an' he was goin' tew git him. Wal th' Injun reached th' trees, leaped off his hoss, an' was springin' for a tree, when Kit Carson, his hoss goin' at full speed, threw his rifle tew his shoulder an' fired. An' he got th' Injun!" and Bridger half arose, his eyes glittering with excitement. "He got him!" he repeated. "Th' Injun jest give one jump up in th' air an' fell dead, his rifle goin' off as he fell. Now that's what I call mighty good shootin', seein' that both Kit's hoss an' th' Injun war on th' jump. But Kit jest had tew git him;

an', sumhow, when Kit has tew do a thing, he kin always do it.

"An' Kit always knows jest th' proper thing to do at jest th' right time; an' you can't scare or bluff him a little bit," Rad Dawson declared. "I reckon if it hadn't a-ben for Kit's coolness an' knowin' jest what to do, there wouldn't be any scalp on my head right now."

"And you've never told us a word about it!" interjected Dill indignantly.

"Forgot all 'bout it," Rad laughed, " 'til Bridger's an' Smith's yarns brought it to my mind."

"But it isn't too late now," Rex admonished.

"Sartin. Give us th' yarn," Bridger urged. "I never heared it."

"All right," and Rad laid down his pipe, declaring he could not talk "with a pipe atween" his teeth. " 'Twas when we were camped on th' Colorado River 'long with Captain Young—"

"The same Captain Young we know?" broke in Dill excitedly. "The Captain Young who outfitted us at Santa Fé?"

"Th' very same gentleman," answered Rad. "Now, young feller, if you want tew hear this story, don't you be interruptin' me no more."

Dill promptly subsided and Rad began again.

"As I was sayin," he continued, " 'twas when we were camped on th' Colorado, an' trappin' tharabouts, that one day, when Kit an' 'bout a dozen of

us trappers had been left in charge of th' camp, th' rest of th' trappers bein' out lookin' after th' traps, 'bout five hundred Injuns came marchin' intew camp as bold as you please, perfessin' th' greatest love an' affection for us whites; but I could see that Kit didn't place much confidence in their perfessions of friendship an' was keepin' mighty close watch on 'em, an' soon he managed, kinder careless-like, tew git us trappers altogether in a sort of a bunch.

" 'Boys,' he said, laughin', jest as if he was tellin' a funny story, so as to fool th' reds, who couldn't understand a word of English, 'Them Injuns have all got their weapons concealed under their blankets, an' I reckon they're intendin' tew murder us all, so as tew git our furs an' outfits. Now,' an' Kit laughed ag'in, 'if you'll jest keep cool an' do jest as I tell you, I reckon we can bluff th' Injuns off. Everybody laugh,' an once ag'in Kit burst intew a loud laugh, an' we all laughed with him, jest as if it was a corkin' good story he'd told us; but, I reckon none of us felt much like laughin', leastwise I know I didn't.

" 'Now,' an' Kit was smilin', 'I'll cover that big chief with th' grizzly b'ar necklace, an', when I say ready, you all cock your rifles an' stand ready tew shoot th' first Injun that makes a hostile move.'

"Kit paused for a moment an' his eyes glanced swiftly around. Th' Injuns were stalkin' about as if they owned th' hull camp, an' th' big chief was

a-talkin' tew a bunch of head warriors not more'n ten feet from whar Kit was a-standin'. Th' proper time had come, an' Kit knowed it.

" 'Ready!' he cried, an' throwed his rifle tew his shoulder an' pointed it pointblank at th' big chief's head, while we all cocked our rifles an' stood ready tew shoot any red devil that moved a hand toward his weapon.

"Wal, I reckon them Injuns was s'prised sum! Th' big chief turned almost yeller with fright, an' not one of th' rest on 'em dared tew move a muscle. They knowed, if it come to shootin', we wouldn't miss.

"Then Kit began tew talk Spanish to them. Most Injuns know a little Spanish. He told them he'd looked intew their hearts an' found them all bad, that he had listened tew their words of friendship an' discovered they were all lies, that they'd come with words of love in their mouths an' guns an' knives under their blankets; an' ended by tellin' every one on 'em tew git out of that camp jest as fast as his legs could take him, an' that th' big chief would git a bullet through his head th' first time one of his warriors made a hostile move, an' that afore they could kill us we'd send a lot of his warriors tew th' happy hunting-grounds.

"Wal, th' big chief an' his warriors stood glarin' at us for more'n a minute; but we jest waited, our guns cocked an' held ready for instant use, ready

tew shoot th' moment one on 'em drew a weapon, while Kit kept his cocked gun leveled plumb at th' big chief's head.

" 'Git!' ag'in said Kit, an' he took a step toward th' big chief.

"Then, I reckon, they seed we was dead in arnest; an' I'll be blessed, if them hull five hundred Injuns didn't turn tail an' march out of th' camp, lookin' as ugly as devils, but not one on 'em darin' tew touch a weapon. Now, that's what I call knowin' jest what tew do, at jest th' right moment, an' doin' it in jest th' right way. It takes nerve an' grit tew work that kind of a bluff; an' I don't believe there is another man in th' Rockies that could have done it. But Kit didn't 'pear tew think he done nothin'."

"That is just what I like 'bout Kit Carson," Captain Tom said. "He never brags. He just does things, and lets the deeds do their own talking. And I've found out that that is the kind of man to tie to every time. I never knowed Kit Carson to utter a boastful word."

"Dat dar Kit Ca'son must be de debbel ob a man, fo' sho'!" ejaculated Pom, who had been listening to the tales with wide-opened rolling eyes. "I's done pow'ful glad dat Kit Ca'son ain't no Injun, 'case I spec'lates if he war he'd done kill all ob us," and Pom shuddered at the gory thought and felt of the kinks of wool on top of his head.

Now, you boys can imagine and need not be told,

how these stories of Kit Carson and the long talk that followed, delighted Rex and Dill, and how, after Jim Bridger and Captain Tom and Steeltrap Smith had gone, they crawled under the furs of their bunks and lay for many minutes, listening to the crying of the wind outside and thinking over the exciting scenes they had had so vividly pictured to them and longing for the time to come when their own eyes would see this hero—Kit Carson, before sleep at last came and quieted their whispering tongues and perturbed brains.

CHAPTER XVII

BUSTER'S GREAT FIGHT

NOT until the last of February did the weather permit Jim Bridger and his trappers and our friends to break up their winter camp in the valley between the Bighorn Mountains and the Wind River Mountains. Then came a great thaw; and the snow melted from the mountain sides and from the mountain passes, and flowed off in floods of water down the eastern and the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains, through innumerable creeks and rivers and across great plains, to the waiting waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans; and the ice fetters fell from off the chilled limbs of the mountain streams and set their waters free; and the strong walls of winter were thrown down; and the forces of spring entered the fastnesses of the mountains; and the imprisoned trappers were once again at liberty to go whither they listed.

Rex and Dill had enjoyed every day of their long sojourn in that wild and romantic mountain valley; and, when at last the day came to say good-by to their camp on the little wooded knoll, to the little hut that had sheltered them so warmly and hospitably during the storms and the cold of winter, it

was almost like saying good-by to home. They had come to have an affectionate regard for every log in their own little cabin, and for all its picturesque surroundings of huts and woods and valley and mountains, endeared by so many delightful or interesting or thrilling associations.

Over yonder, by that little patch of woods near the needle-like projection of rock, they had killed their first elk, a huge buck, with a great spread of horns that they had hung proudly above the door of their hut. Away over there, across the valley, where that black gash showed in the mountain side, was the gully in which they had had the exciting adventure with the huge he grizzly, when both boys, after wounding the bear, had been chased up a tree and compelled to stay there until, after yelling for an hour, Rad Dawson and Ham had heard their calls, and had come and killed the grizzly. Then there were the steep hills a mile back of the camp, where they had spent many happy hours sliding down their sides on the rude sleds Ham had taught them how to make; the tall dead pine tree near by, from whose topmost limb Rex had shot an eagle one morning; the bluffs three miles to the north of the camp, where they had hunted the mountain sheep with Rad and Ham and each boy had killed a ram; and the dozens of other spots and localities that had become endeared to the two lads through some pleasing or exciting adventure. But now they must say farewell to all this, and go on further into

the wilderness of mountains and valleys stretching to the west of them; and, notwithstanding their eagerness to go, the thought that they might never see these pleasing and endeared scenes again saddened their going.

With the passing of the snow from the mountain passes and valleys and the unfettering of the mountain streams, the trapping season had again opened; and all the trappers were anxious to be at their work, catching the beaver and the other fur bearing animals.

Before leaving the valley Jim Bridger divided his brigade of trappers into two parties of seventy-five men each. One party was to go North to the South Fork of Snake River, where they were to begin trapping, gradually working southward until it became time to start for the rendezvous on Green River; while the other party, under the command of Bridger himself, was to cross over the Wind River Mountains through the South Pass and trap along the eastern streams of the Green River Valley, until it was time to go to the mouth of Horse Creek on Green River, where the summer's rendezvous was to be held.

Captain Tom, after consultation with Hammer Jones and others of his trappers, decided to join Bridger's party, and trap with them until all went to the rendezvous on Green River. This would be much safer than it would be for his little party to strike out all by itself, since the Indians seldom

ventured to attack or to seriously harass as large a body of trappers as would be with Jim Bridger.

Rex and Dill, who had made a number of warm friends among Bridger's trappers, were very much pleased with this arrangement, since it would enable them to continue many of these friendships. Besides they had long wished to see how one of the large bodies of trappers, sent out every year by the great fur companies, conducted themselves when engaged in the actual work of trapping; and now they were to have their wish.

The morning of the last day of February found everybody and everything ready for the start. The pack-horses were all loaded and stood in two long lines, the trappers all sat on their horses, their long rifles resting across the pommels of their saddles in front of them—all waiting for the command to advance from Jim Bridger, who was giving his last instructions to the leader of the party of trappers going north.

At last Bridger galloped to a point midway between the two long lines of trappers and pack-horses; and, rising in his stirrups, waved his cap and shouted a bit dramatically: "Forward!" And, with a great shouting to and fro and the bandying of many rude jokes and the calling of cheery farewells, the two divisions of trappers started for their spring trapping grounds, one headed almost directly north, and the other due west toward the distant peaks of the Wind River Mountains.

For an hour they journeyed, each in sight of the other, then a low ridge of rocks rose in front of Bridger and his party of trappers. On the summit of this ridge, the cavalcade halted; and all turned in their saddles to wave a last farewell to their comrades, now stretching in a long gray line of horses and men across the distant level of the prairie, and to have a last look at the valley where they had passed so many pleasant weeks.

"Look there!" cried Rex, pointing to the distant party of trappers that now, also, had come to a halt. "I am sure that that man on the big black horse, who is waving his hat so frantically, is Steeltrap Smith; and I think he is waving farewell to us. Let's let him know that we understand," and, pulling off their hats, both boys galloped a few rods in front of their party, and, standing up in their stirrups, swung their hats around their heads. Then the distant man on the black horse galloped out in front on his horse, and swung his hat more frantically than ever.

"That's Steeltrap, sure," laughed Dill. "And he's as tickled as a boy to have us recognize him and wave him a special farewell. I don't believe our own fathers would do more for us than old Steeltrap would. He seems to have taken a special fancy to us lads ever since that night he came to our hut with Bridger and told us about Kit Carson. I wish he might have gone with us; but Bridger said he knew the country and the Indians in the Snake

River region the best of any man in the party and that they couldn't spare him. But we'll see him again at the rendezvous," and Dill's face brightened.

"Yes," Rex answered, "and I am glad that we will, for I can't help liking the old fellow, even if he does sometimes look and act queer. But I know why he looks and acts that way now. Bridger told me only this morning. You see he was captured by the Indians about ten years ago, and, when rescued, he was almost dead. They had been torturing him, the brutes," and Rex shuddered and his face whitened; for his own father, many years before, had been captured by the Indians and had never been heard of since; and the thought of what his fate must have been was so terrible that Rex could never bear to speak of his father himself nor to hear anyone else speak of him; and so his name was seldom mentioned.

"And," continued the boy, after a moment's pause, "when the trapper got well again, he had forgotten even his own name and everything that had happened to him in the past. No one knew who he was; and so, because he appeared to know a lot about trapping, someone called him Steeltrap Smith, and he has been known by that name ever since."

"Poor fellow!" and Dill's face softened and saddened. "It must be terrible not to know who you are. Why, he might have a family and never know it!—There, Bridger has started on. We must be

going," and, whirling their horses about, the two boys galloped back to their places in the cavalcade of trappers that now passed slowly over the ridge, and soon the valley and the distant band of trappers were hidden from sight.

For a week Bridger and his party of trappers wound their way slowly westward, through a wild and rocky country, terminating in a gradually ascending sandy plain that led upward to the South Pass, through which they passed; and then, one afternoon, they came to a swift little stream of water, running westward down the slope of the mountains.

"Hurrah!" shouted Ham, as he paused on the bank of the stream and looked down into the water. "We're 'cross th' backbone of th' Rockies. Them's trout in th' water, an' they're only found in streams runnin' down th' west side of th' Rockies."

This was good news to all; for now they could soon begin their trapping. Indeed, the next day they came to where the mountain stream emptied into the Little Sandy River; and here Bridger pitched his camp and sent out scouts through the surrounding country to learn if the beavers in the neighboring streams and valleys were in sufficient numbers to pay to trap them. The scouts returned the next day, and all having reported the beaver prospects good, it was determined to begin trapping.

Now, for nearly three months, Bridger and the trappers with him searched the valleys and streams

west of the Wind River Mountains for the beavers and the other fur bearing animals; and then, the weather becoming hot and the beavers beginning to shed their fur, rendering their skins worthless for commercial purposes, the traps were collected, and, with light hearts, but with pack-horses heavily loaded with rich furs, our band of trappers set out joyfully one morning near the middle of May for the summer's rendezvous in the broad valley where the Horse Creek empties into the upper waters of the Green River.

Rex and Dill had had great times during this trapping season, hunting, fishing, trapping, visiting neighboring villages of friendly Indians, and sharing pluckily with the men in all the work and the hardships of the wild life of the camp. They learnt how to trap the beaver with almost the skill of veteran trappers. They became experts in the simple cookery of the camp. They acquired wonderful skill with their rifles and won a great reputation for successful hunting. And every day they grew more sturdy in physique and health, more manly and resourceful, as their bodies and minds and characters developed under the wholesome and stirring influences of their active outdoor life. Even Pom came under the influence of the wonderful life they were living, and lost a little of his useless flesh and gained a great deal in independence and resourcefulness of character. While Buster, the grizzly bear cub, grew apace, until now he was

nearly half grown and more than a match for any two dogs that he met in the Indian villages. He followed Rex and Dill around like a big dog, and with them he was always gentle and affectionate; but, let any of the trappers attempt to torment him or to torment either of the boys, and his temper would flare up in an instant and he would rush at the tormentors with all the fearlessness and savage fury of his race. He seemed to feel that one of his duties was to protect the two boys, who had cared for and protected him so often.

Captain Tom and Bridger had both declared that the brute was getting too big and strong to be safe and had threatened to shoot him; but the earnest pleadings of the two boys had so far delayed the execution; and now, on the morning of the start for the rendezvous, he was trotting along sedately by the side of White Cloud, swinging his head from side to side after the manner of bears, and every now and then glancing upward at his master seated in the saddle above him.

"How long do you suppose it will take for us to get to the rendezvous?" Rex queried, as the two boys journeyed along side by side.

"A couple of weeks," Dill replied. "I heard Bridger telling Captain Tom this morning. He says that our pack-horses are so heavily loaded that we can't make much over a dozen miles a day, and that we'll have to go around Robin Hood's barn

to get there, in order to avoid the steep places. Let me see, that will get us there about the last of June —O, look over there!" and he pointed excitedly to a high table-like ridge of rocks half a mile to their right, on whose top there appeared at that moment a stately "Billy" mountain goat leading a flock of a dozen ewes and kids. "Come. Let's ask Bridger if we can't hunt them. We haven't killed a mountain goat yet, and that Billy is a dandy," and, followed by Rex, he galloped to where Bridger and Captain Tom were riding at the head of the cavalcade.

Bridger smiled sympathetically, when he heard the boys' request; then he studied the goats and the surrounding country for a minute.

"Reckon 'twill be all right tew let 'em go, won't it Tom?" he said, turning to Captain Tom. "Th' country's safe enough, an' they can't git lost, seein' all they've got tew do is jest tew follow up stream. We'll camp on that stream tew-night, 'bout ten miles further up," and he pointed to where a small stream of water flowed a few rods to the left of the trail.

Captain Tom agreed with Bridger, and the boys were given permission to make the hunt.

"One of you'd better ride tew one end of th' ridge an' t'other tew t'other end," advised Bridger. "Then you can tie your hosses, an' when you creep up on th' goats you'll have 'em atween two rifles.

Keep watch of th' side next tew th' mountains. Goats always run for th' highest ground in sight, when frightened."

Rex and Dill concluded to follow Bridger's advice, and a moment later each set out on a gallop for his end of the ridge.

The ridge was, perhaps, a mile long, and from four to five hundred feet high, with a fringe of heavy woods growing along its side. The goats stood on an open table-like space near the middle of the ridge. The woods would hide the young hunters from their sharp eyes, while the wind, blowing almost directly across the ridge, could not carry the scent of either boy to their keen nostrils.

Rex reached his end of the ridge, and, tying White Cloud to a tree, he at once began cautiously making his way up through the woods toward the center of the ridge, all the time keeping a sharp lookout for the goats. As he advanced through the trees, he bent over almost double, as one often will when stalking game; and, perhaps, this caused him to be mistaken for a deer, or, perhaps, the animal was wild with hunger, at any rate, suddenly, as he was passing under a huge tree, without a warning sound, a mountain lion dropped down on his back.

Rex caught a glimpse of the beast a fraction of a second before he struck, but not in time to avoid him; and boy and brute tumbled to the ground

together, the lion on top, and Rex, for the moment, stunned and helpless.

How long he lay unconscious Rex never knew, but it was probably only a few seconds. When he opened his eyes he lay on his back, with the mountain lion crouched over him, his fore paws resting on his breast, his head held high and his tail thumping the ground angrily. The brute was growling furiously and his eyes were glaring off in the woods to his right.

For a moment Rex lay, wondering dreamily why the lion did not turn and rend him with his teeth and claws, wondering when he would begin to eat him. At first he did not seem to care much, did not seem to think the matter worth the trouble of making a struggle; and then, all of a sudden, his brain cleared and he realized fully and at the same moment the horrible nature of his situation and his utter helplessness. He knew, if he made a move, even to draw his hunting-knife, that the sharp teeth would be sunk into his body on the instant.

But, why had not the hungry lion already begun his feast?

At that instant, as if in answer to his unspoken query, Rex heard a savage growl coming from the woods near by, heard the lion snarl and saw him bare his white teeth and crouch lower; and the next moment, a huge body hurled itself upon the beast, and the two tumbled to the ground together by the

side of Rex, biting, clawing, growling and snarling.

Rex leaped to his feet and, springing out of reach of the struggling animals, stared in astonishment at the fighting brutes.

Whence had come his rescuer?

At first in the confusion of his own mind and in the still greater confusion of the whirling, biting, clawing beasts, Rex could not tell what kind of an animal it was that had so opportunely attacked the mountain lion; and then, with a thrill of pride, he saw that it was Buster, the grizzly bear cub, that was fighting so desperately for his life with the big cat.

"Bully for you, Buster!" he yelled, forgetting everything but the excitement of the fight. "Give it to him, Buster!"

And then, seeing that Buster was apparently getting the worst of the fight, he began an excited search for his rifle, which had been knocked out of his hands when the lion had dropped down on top of him. In a moment he had found the gun, and, quickly seizing it, he threw it to his shoulder and tried to get a shot at the lion; but, so swiftly did the two beasts change places, that it was fully three minutes before the excited boy dared to risk a shot; and then he got sudden aim at the lion's head and pulled the trigger.

The ball struck true, and, in a minute more, the lion lay dead, with Buster still tearing savagely at him.

Rex now called to the cub and, at the voice of his master, the bear quit worrying the dead lion and turned and dragged himself to the boy's feet. A glance told Rex that the bear was fearfully hurt, beyond all possible hope of recovery. The sharp claws of the powerful brute had ripped him open in such a terrible manner that only a grizzly could have fought a moment with such wounds; and, even as Rex threw himself down by his side, the faithful animal, in a last effort to lick his master's hand, died.

Rex dug out a shallow grave in the ground at the foot of the great tree, using his hunting-knife for a spade, and buried his hero-pet there. Then he piled heavy stones over the grave, to keep the beasts from digging up the body, and carved, with his knife, in the trunk of the tree, this epitaph:

BUSTER
THE BEST BEAR THAT EVER LIVED
DIED FIGHTING
ON THIS SPOT
TO SAVE THE LIFE OF HIS MASTER.

These sad duties performed, Rex turned to the dead mountain lion. He found that Buster, young as he was, had given a terrible account of himself and that the lion, probably, would have died from his wounds, in the course of an hour or two, even if his bullet had not struck him.

The dead lion was one of the largest Rex had ever seen; and, when he had the skin off his body, he flung it over his shoulder, and, with a last look at the grave of Buster returned to where he had left White Cloud, mounted, and set out after the cavalcade of trappers that by this time had passed out of sight in the distance. As he rode out of the woods that fringed the base of the ridge, Dill joined him. He reported that the mountain goats had taken fright long before he had got within shot of them, and that he had last seen them bounding up the almost precipitous side of one of the mountains back of the ridge.

Dill felt very badly over the loss of Buster; and, when Rex had finished his story of the bear's great fight and heroic death, there were tears in the eyes of both lads.

"And—and to think Bridger and Captain Tom wanted to shoot him!" Dill exclaimed indignantly. "I guess they'll wish now that they had never said a word about killing the brave little fellow."

Dill was right; for that night, when the two boys had reached camp and Rex had told his story, Bridger declared: "If that b'ar had come out of that scrap with th' lion all right, I'd a-fed him on buffalo steaks with my own hand an' a-fought for his life same as I would for any good comrade's. That's th' only grizzly I ever knowed tew act human," and every man in camp would have said amen to that sentiment.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BIG BULLY OF THE MOUNTAINS

MOUNTAIN floods and storms and the difficulties of the roadless, bridgeless trail delayed Bridger and his brigade of trappers, so that it was nearing the first of July when at length one afternoon they reached the top of the last intervening elevation, and looked down on the broad expanse of the level prairie, bordering both sides of the Green River, where the trappers' summer rendezvous was to be held. Already the valley was dotted with the tents and huts of trappers and traders and friendly Indians, making a very pleasing and picturesque picture, in its frame of wild and desolate mountainous surroundings.

The scene, as their long train wound its way into camp, was one that Rex and Dill never forgot. All its varied and motley inhabitants gathered around them, shouting, laughing, gesticulating, hand-shaking, each in his own peculiar and boisterous way giving them hearty welcome. French-Canadians, Americans, Spaniards, Mexicans, half-breeds, Indians, from all the four quarters of the great West, jostled one another's shoulders as they crowded about the newcomers, each anxious to see

if there were any among them that he knew and to give all a glad welcome whether or not he knew them.

"I did not suppose there would be any where near as many people here as there are," Dill said, when the excitement had quieted down a little, and the two boys stood by the sides of their horses watching the picturesque and animated scene. "Why, there must be nearly a thousand people, not counting the Indians! I wonder where they all came from."

"Wal," laughed Hammer Jones, who stood near, "that ain't none difficult tew answer. They all jest comed from th' mountains an' streams an' valleys an' plains of this here great West, some on 'em travelin' a thousand miles or more tew git here. This here yearly rendezvous is th' trappers' fair, a sort of mount'in carnival, an' I reckon thar ain't a trapper in th' Rockies that would miss it. If he had tew crawl on his hands an' knees, he'd git here."

"But they are not all trappers," interposed Rex.

" 'Course not," retorted Ham. "Who'd they sell the'r skins tew, if they was? There's traders from St. Louie an' Santa Fé an' other points of civil'zation, an' each one on 'em's got his guards an' hunters an' packers an' cooks an' gineral camp helpers; but them don't count," he added scornfully. "Th' trapper is th' cock of this here walk."

"An' th' free trapper, meanin' th' trapper what owns his own outfit an' does his own trappin' an'

tradin', is head cockalorum of all th' trappers," supplemented Rad Dawson, who had just dismounted and stood near by, leaning on the long barrel of his rifle. "Now I calls this a mighty interestin' gatherin'," and his eyes glanced around the motley assemblage approvingly.

During this time Captain Tom and Jim Bridger had been holding a brief consultation with the leaders of the encampment, to learn where they had best pitch their camp; and now, the place having been agreed upon, they at once gathered their men together and proceeded to the spot, a beautiful grove of large trees on the bank of Horse Creek, half a mile from the main encampment.

The horses were now unsaddled and unpacked and hobbled and turned loose to feed on the rich grass of the river bottom, and then the men set about making the camp as comfortable as possible, for they expected to remain in camp here until the rendezvous broke up, some two months later.

From the moment they had entered the encampment Rex and Dill had been on the lookout for Kit Carson; but neither boy had seen any one that bore any resemblance to the mind-picture that he had painted of his hero; and Ham and Rad, who both knew Kit and had been on the watch for him, had failed to see him; consequently both lads feared that they were again doomed to disappointment.

"Now, let's go and ask Captain Tom, if Kit Carson is here," Dill said, the moment their camp duties

gave the boys the leisure. "He has talked with the leaders of the encampment and must know."

Captain Tom was hard at work, superintending the putting up of a large buffalo-skin tent; but he received the boys with a smile.

"Yes," he grinned joyously, in answer to their anxious query, "Kit Carson is here. Got in three days ago. But he's out on a buffalo hunt with some of his Indian friends just now, and might not get back for a day or two. Reckon you've found him at last, lads, and I am mighty glad of it. Got your tent up?"

"No," Rex answered. "We were too anxious to find out about Kit Carson to wait until after the tent was up; but we are going right at it now. You know Ham and Rad are to be our tent-mates, and they are to help us."

"Better hurry the tent up. Looks like there was a big storm coming," and Captain Tom glanced to where black storm clouds hung over the western mountains.

"All right," Rex replied. "Let us know the moment Kit Carson gets back to camp," and the two boys hurried back to where Ham and Rad and Pom were already busy at work getting the poles and buffalo skins ready for the tent.

"Kit Carson is here!" yelled Dill, as the two boys ran up to where the tent builders were at work.

"But he's out on a buffalo hunt with some Indians," supplemented Rex, "and might not get back

for a day or two. That's why we did not see him among the crowd."

"That's bully good news," declared Ham. "I'll be powerful glad tew see Kit. But, I reckon, you'd better git busy, or that storm'll catch us."

In an hour's time, so swiftly and skillfully did all work, the skin tent of tanned buffalo robes was up and ready for occupancy; and they were just in time, for hardly had the last skin been firmly tied in its place, when the storm swept down upon them with a suddenness and fury of rain and hail and wind known only in the mountains. But Ham and Rad were experienced tent makers; and the wind roared and shook the tent in a vain effort to bring about its overthrow, and the rain and the hail beat down on it in torrents, without so much as a drop of rain or a single hailstone falling inside. Even the opening in the center of the tent, where the poles came together, had been covered over with a skin, making the whole rain proof.

Dry and safe inside the tent sat the two boys and Ham and Rad and Pom, listening contentedly and with a pleasing sense of comfort to the pounding of the hail and the beating of the raindrops on the tent, to the wild music of the storm outside. For an hour the storm roared and crashed and thundered, the rain falling in torrents, after the manner of mountain storms; and then, with the coming of night and darkness, it settled down into a steady drizzle that kept the two boys, who were anxious to visit the

neighboring camps, in the shelter of their tent for the night. But, notwithstanding this enforced seclusion, the evening passed very pleasantly for Rex and Dill, who sat listening to the tales of Ham and Rad, suggested by the storm without, until it was time to roll themselves up in their blankets and let the wild lullaby of the storm lull them to sleep.

The next morning the sun shone down warmly from a cloudless sky; and everything—the grim mountains towering in a distant circle around the valley, the tall trees, the low shrubs, the gay flowers and the rich new grass of the river bottom—glowed in the sunlight, refreshed and invigorated from the night's bath, as if newly painted by the loving hand of nature. Through the clear morning air the smoke of a hundred camp-fires, built in front of the log or brush hut or canvas or skin tent of the trader or trapper or Indian, was slowly curling upward, while the morning's meal was being cooked. Around the fires stood picturesque groups of the wild inhabitants—white and red—of the surrounding mountains and valleys, talking, laughing, shouting and sometimes even bursting into song in the wild exuberance of their spirits. On the prairie about the encampments fed the seemingly countless horses of the traders and the trappers and the Indians, luxuriating in the warmth of the sun and the rich abundance of the grass, after the cold and the hardships of the winter and the long and toilsome journeying to the rendezvous.

Such was the delightful and romantic scene that met the eyes of Rex and Dill, when, on this morning, after the breakfast had been eaten and their few camp duties had been performed, the two boys, filled with eager curiosity, started out, accompanied by their dark shadow, Pom, to see the sights of this queer little city of the wilderness.

There were a number of fine groves in the valley, and one of the largest of these had been utilized for the business part of the little city. Here the underbrush had all been cleared away, and under the cool shade of the lofty trees the "stores" of the traders had been established. For a thousand or more miles these wilderness merchants had packed their goods on the backs of horses and mules across desolate plains and treacherous rivers, over hills and mountains and through dangerous canyons and up and down steep defiles, with a cloud of savages ever hovering around them, eager for a chance to rob and murder; and from equally great distances and over as dangerous and difficult trails, the trappers had come from mountain and valley to meet the merchants here and to exchange their furs for the traders' wares.

Rex and Dill wished to do a little shopping on their own account, and, consequently, they first directed their steps toward this grove and the stores and grocery stands of the traders. They had no ready money with them; but money was not needed here to make purchases, for each lad had what an-

swered equally as well as money in this queer little wilderness city, a small bundle of beaver skins.

They found the "stores" all open and doing a rushing business; for, as it happened, the trading, which had been held back until the last expected band of trappers had arrived, so as to give all an equal chance, had commenced that day, the last brigade of trappers having reached camp during the night; and all the motley inhabitants—white men and red men—were as eager as women at a bargain counter to dispose of their furs and make their purchases, and crowded excitedly around the rude stalls of the traders, loaded down with their furs, and vociferated their wants in many tongues.

For an hour or more Rex and Dill stood watching this interesting scene, then they pushed their way into the midst of the crowd around one of the largest of these busy marts, anxious to make their own purchases. They had not tasted coffee nor sugar nor bread for many weeks, and they were planning a great feast for that night, with coffee and sugar and biscuits to grace it.

Naturally, under the circumstances, the prices of these luxuries, as the trappers considered them, were high. The coffee cost the boys two dollars and a half a pint, the sugar two dollars a pint, and the flour a dollar and a half a quart; but, what cared they for prices! They had plenty of beaver skins to spend, and soon their furs had passed over the counter of the trader and the pre-

cious packages of sugar and coffee and flour were in their possession.

"My, but this coffee smells good!" Rex declared, as he sniffed delightedly at the package. "Seems as if I couldn't wait until night to have a drink of it. Here, Pom," he cried, as he caught sight of the negro boy. "Take these packages to camp. Dill and I want to have a look around and we do not care to be bothered with the carrying of them."

The boys handed their packages of coffee and sugar and flour to Pom, and the negro boy hurried off with them back to camp, declaring, "dat dar coffee done smelled like a bref comin' straight frum a b'akfast table in hebben."

Unfortunately nearly all of the "stores" sold whisky, and already a number of the trappers, under its baleful influence, were swaggering around, boasting of their prowess and describing the terrible things they would do to any one hardy enough to oppose their lawlessness of word and act.

"I don't see how any full-grown man can drink any of that stuff, knowing what a disagreeable brute it will make of him," Rex declared disgustedly, as one of these obstreperous bullies paused a few feet from where the boys were standing to take a drink out of his whiskey flask. "Now, look at that big brute," and he pointed to the whiskey drinker. "I just saw him knock a fellow, a much smaller man than he, down, just because he did not get out of his way quick enough to suit him."

At this moment the bully's eyes caught sight of Rex's pointing finger and he scowled savagely, and, taking the flask from his mouth, turned toward them.

"Have a drink?" and, holding out the flask, he advanced toward Rex and Dill, a wicked grin on his brutal-looking face.

"No," Rex answered shortly. "Neither of us drink whisky," and he turned his back on the man, the disgust on his face showing very plainly as he did so.

"Hey!" and the man with a quick jump caught Rex by the shoulder with one of his great hands, and, jerking him around, thrust his face down close to the face of the boy. "Maybe you no hear me," he snarled. "I say, have a drink. I, the Big Bully of the Rocky Mountains, say, have a drink; and now you drink," and he attempted to push the mouth of the flask between Rex's teeth.

Rex was mad, and, in his anger, he forgot all caution; and, with one blow of his right fist he knocked the flask from the man's hand, and, at the same time, tore himself free from his grip, and, leaping back turned on the bully a face flaming with indignation and defiance.

Dill, his dark eyes gleaming like sword points, leaped to the side of Rex.

"You big coward!" he yelled. "Keep your old whiskey to yourself. We don't want it and we won't drink it."

The bully, the moment Rex knocked the flask out of his hand, leaped to save its contents; but it had fallen mouth downward and, before he could pick it up, all the whiskey had run out of the flask.

"You d—d American!" and, with eyes bloodshot with rage, the man hurled the empty flask straight at the head of Rex and sprang toward him.

"Run!" yelled someone in the crowd that had quickly gathered around them. "Run, or he'll kill you!"

But Rex and Dill did not run. They were not made of that kind of stuff. Rex dodged the whiskey flask, doubled up his fists and prepared to defend his young manhood as best he could; and Dill, with doubled-up fists, stood unflinchingly by his side.

But the bully was a great giant of a man, on whose bared arms the corded muscles stood out in great knots, who had gained skill in many a fist fight; and, almost before the boys knew what was happening, they were hurled backward to the ground, knocked senseless by blows from the bully's fists.

With curses the big brute sprang toward the prostrate boys; but, before he could reach them, a dozen stalwart arms seized him, and with yells of "Shame!" "Shame!" forced him away from the boys. The bully cursed and bragged and threatened, and, finally, struck one of the men a brutal blow in the face. This, of course meant a fight; and when Rex and Dill recovered consciousness and

struggled to their feet, the two men stood in a hastily formed ring, their bodies bared to the waist, ready for the fight.

It needed but a glance to show that the Big Bully of the Mountains outmatched his opponent in size and muscular development, while his known skill with his fists left the outcome of the contest in little doubt; but the man was game and faced him bravely.

At the word, each leaped for the other. This was to be no scientific sparring match for points, but a brutal slugging match for knockout blows. For a couple of minutes the little man held his own, making up in agility what he lacked in bulk and strength. Twice he struck the big Frenchman (the bully was French) in the face, making his nose bleed and knocking him backward; and his friends wildly yelled encouragement to him, while Rex and Dill danced up and down with excitement. Then the big fist crashed against his head, and he went down, as if struck by a ton pile driver; and, before he could struggle to his feet, even before he had got his senses back, the brute was upon him, pounding the helpless man with sickening brutality until he was forced to desist by the strong arms of a dozen trappers.

Now how the big bully did swagger and bluster and brag, declaring that he could flog all the Frenchmen present, and that, as for the Americans, he was going to cut willow whips and switch them all.

"O, why don't someone wade into the big brute

and knock the stuffings out of him!" lamented Rex indignantly. "I am sure there are men here that can do it."

"Thar might be sum on us who could thrash Shunan in a fair fight," answered a big trapper, who stood near enough to overhear Rex's exclamation; "but he's an ugly customer, an' never fights fair, an' is mighty careful not to rile th' fightin' blood of anyone on us he thinks stands a good show of lickin' him. Howsumever I reckon 'twon't be long afore he makes a discuvery. I reckon he's goin' tew make one right now," and the face of the big trapper lighted up with the intensest interest, as his eyes rested on the figure of a man, who had just stepped out from the crowd and stood quietly facing the bully.

He was young, this newcomer on the scene, probably not more than twenty-five years old; but with such a strong masterly-looking face that one forgot his age when looking into the twinkling gray eyes and on the square chin and firm lips. He was not a large man. The Big Bully of the Mountains overtopped him by nearly a foot. But he had the look of having the steel-like strength and agility of a deer in his compactly built frame. Evidently he was well-known to the trappers; for, on the moment of his appearance, there came a hush over the crowd, and the big bully stopped abruptly in the midst of a most boastful tirade against all Americans, while it seemed to Rex and Dill, who stood near, that his

dark face whitened beneath the bronze on his cheeks.

" 'Twon't be no sluggin' match now," chuckled the big trapper. "An' I reckon Shunan won't do no more boastin' when it's over. He's riled th' blood of th' wrong man this time."

"Who is he? Who is he?" and Rex caught hold of the big trapper's sleeve excitedly.

"Why, that's Kit, Kit Carson! Whar did you come from not tew know Kit?" and the trapper stared at his questioner much the same as he would if he had asked him what the sun was.

Kit Carson at last! How the eyes of both lads devoured his face and form! How they exulted that it was their hero, their Kit Carson, who had appeared so opportunely and dramatically!

But there was nothing theatrical in either the appearance or the actions of Kit Carson himself, as he stepped out from the crowd and confronted the boasting bully with a quiet firmness more effective than any amount of blustering would have been; and, when he spoke, his voice was not loud, but it was decisive. No one would think of questioning the sincerity of the man back of that voice.

"Captain Shunan," he said, and there was something of the purr of the lion in his quietly-spoken words, "I am one of the smallest and weakest of the American trappers gathered here, among whom I am sure there are many who could easily thrash you, and who would gladly do so, if you personally

"CAPTAIN SHUNAN THIS HAS GOT TO STOP."

affronted them; but you are too cowardly to do this. You always quarrel with a weaker man than yourself. I saw you knock down the two boys, I saw your brutal assault on the trapper, when he lay helpless on the ground, I have listened to your boastful words and threats against the Americans. Captain Shunan, this must stop, or I will be under the necessity of shooting you."

For a full minute Shunan stood staring into the steadfast eyes of Kit Carson, then, without uttering a word, he whirled about on his heels and walked directly to his lodge.

"Backed down! The coward!" cried Dill, unable longer to hold in his excitement.

"No," and the big trapper's face sobered. "He's gone tew git his hoss an' gun. I reckon 'twill be a duel tew th' death. An' Shunan's a mighty quick an' sure shot; but I never knowed a man yet, white or red, tew git th' best of Kit Carson, when it comes tew shootin'. See, Kit's goin' for his hoss an' gun."

As the trapper spoke Kit Carson turned and walked swiftly toward his tent, being too well versed in the rules governing the rude lives of the trappers not to know what the actions of Shunan meant, that it was now shoot or get shot.

All the trappers stood silent, their eyes on the two tents. Not one of them but knew what the actions of the two men portended.

Shunan seized his rifle and mounted his horse

first. Then a little later Kit Carson was seen riding quietly toward him, a single-barrel dragoon pistol in his hand—a pistol against a rifle!

The two men now rode rapidly toward each other, until their horses' noses almost touched, then each suddenly pulled up his horse.

"Am I the man you are looking for?" Kit Carson asked, his steady eyes watching the eyes of Shunan.

The two men were now so near that Rex and Dill both could hear their words distinctly; and their blood almost stopped running, so tense was their excitement.

"No," answered Shunan, and, at the same instant, he threw his rifle to his shoulder.

"Look out! He's going to shoot!" yelled Dill.

But there was no need of that warning cry; for Kit Carson knew his man, had read the murder in his eyes, and the ball from his pistol struck and shattered Shunan's right forearm the fraction of a second before the bullet left his rifle, causing the gun to tilt upwards sufficiently to send the ball intended for his heart through the skin on the top of Carson's head, while the muzzle was so close that the powder burnt his face severely, leaving no doubt as to what the intentions of Shunan were.

Kit Carson had staked his life on his wonderful skill and quickness with the pistol—and had won. He had hit his adversary in one of the only two places—his right or left arm—which would render his aim with the rifle uncertain and disable him

without killing him, thus proving that he had had no intentions of killing Shunan, only of disabling him and of ending forever his career as the brutal Big Bully of the Mountains.

Shunan was at once carried to his quarters, where every attention possible was given to his wound; but no surgery could ever restore those shattered bones to their former strength. Henceforth he was a crippled man, at the mercy of the weakest of those he had so recently bullied and beaten; and the most aggravating cause of trouble was forever removed from that camp.

"Served the big brute just right," Dill exclaimed, when the excitement had somewhat quieted down. "But it was a terrible nervy thing for Kit Carson to do, to stake his life on that one ball in his pistol. Why, if he had missed by the fraction of an inch, or if he had been an instant too late, he would have been killed, and he knew it."

"Sartin he a-been killed, if them ifs had a-had thar way," and a broad hand was slapped down heartily on Dill's shoulder, while another equally broad hand gripped the hand of Rex; "but thar ain't no ifs, when it comes tew Kit Carson, 'specially when it's shootin'. Wal, I'm powerful glad tew see you tew boys ag'in," and the eyes of Steeltrap Smith, shining with pleasure, looked down into the faces of Rex and Dill. "Got intew camp last night. An' how's Jim Bridger an' Captain Tom an' th' rest on th' boys?"

"All right, every one of them," Rex responded. "Come over to our tent to-night. We're going to have a banquet—coffee and sugar and biscuits, all you can drink and eat. Kit Carson and Bridger and Captain Tom will be there. Now we must find Captain Tom and get him to introduce us to Kit Carson. I just saw him in the crowd that has been swarming around Kit Carson like a lot of bees ever since the duel ended. Be sure and be over to our banquet, about an hour before sundown," and Rex and Dill hurried away to where the head of Captain Tom showed above the crowd that still surrounded Kit Carson.

When the boys reached Captain Tom he was talking with Kit Carson. The moment he saw Rex and Dill he turned quickly to them.

"Here's your Kit Carson," he called. "I've told him about you two lads, and he's anxious to see you. These," and he turned to Carson, "are the two boys, Rex Holt and Dill Conroyal, who have come so far to find you, Kit; Kit Carson, boys," and Captain Tom nodded first to Rex then to Dill and finally to Kit Carson.

Kit Carson smiled, and, catching a hand of each boy, shook it warmly, while his twinkling gray eyes looked kindly, yet searchingly, into their faces.

"I knew your father, Noel Conroyal, Con, as we called him, I knew him well," he said to Dill. "And a braver man or a truer friend, never looked along the barrel of a rifle. I am more than pleased to

welcome his boy and nephew to the mountains and the scenes he loved so well."

There was magic in the genial personality of Kit Carson; for, before he let go of their hands, he had won the hearts of Rex and Dill—he already had their unbounded admiration; and they believed in him and trusted him, as a son believes in and trusts a father.

Dill at once gave Kit Carson his father's letter and invited him to their banquet that night; and Carson promised to read the letter and to come early to the banquet, so as to have time to talk over the contents of the letter. Then Carson excused himself and hurried back to his tent, while Rex and Dill hastened back to their camp, to make ready for the banquet, as they were pleased to call the little feast they were to give.

CHAPTER XIX

THE KILLING OF THE BUCK ELK

KIT CARSON, agreeable to his promise, came over to the quarters of Rex and Dill a couple of hours before it was time for the feasting to begin.

"I have read your father's letter," he said to Dill, the moment the greetings were over; "and for Con's sake, I very gladly undertake this mission to California. I remember your Uncle Manuel very well, and the circumstance of our being at the San Rafael Mission together, and that he was interested in some papers that one of the brothers had; but I did not suppose the papers were as important as Con appears to think them. Your father wants those papers as soon as they can be got, and he shall have them. We will start for California to-morrow morning at sunrise. I have already spoken to Captain Tom, and he and his trappers will go with us. I have also asked Steeltrap Smith to be one of the party, because there is not another man in the West that knows the country through which we will pass better than he does, and he is brave and trustworthy, and will stand by a comrade to the death. This will make nineteen in the company, sufficient to protect us from the Indians. Captain Tom and Hammer

Jones and Steeltrap Smith are now busy selling the furs and purchasing the supplies. We will get everything ready to-night, so that there will be no delay in the morning. If there are any little things that you would like to buy, you must get them to-day; but do not get anything to take with you unless you absolutely need it. I cannot stop to talk with you longer now, for there are a number of things that I must look after at once; but we'll all be with you at the banquet to-night a little after sundown, so have everything ready for us," and, with a smiling adieu, Kit Carson hurried away, leaving two very surprised and somewhat dumbfounded boys. They were beginning to see how Kit Carson had won and held his mastery over his comrades.

"Why," exclaimed Dill, the moment his surprised wits began coming back, "he didn't even ask us if we could get ready to go by to-morrow morning, he just told us that we would start to-morrow at sunrise, as if starting to California was nothing more than starting off on a day's hunt, and California must be a good thousand miles from here!"

"And he didn't give us a chance to say a word," Rex complained. "There were a lot of questions I wanted to ask him; but the moment he stopped talking, he said good-by and was off before I could get my mouth open. I don't wonder the trappers think there is no one quite like Kit Carson to do things. Now, is there anything we want to get? Because, if there is, we've got to get it right off quick."

For a few minutes the boys considered this problem; and then both lads concluded, that, since there was nothing absolutely needed, there was nothing they would be justified in buying under the circumstances.

"Besides," as Rex sagely remarked, "if we get what we've got ready, there won't be any time to waste."

Rex was right. That was one of the busiest afternoons the boys ever had; but, by sundown, they had all of their belongings packed and ready for the pack-horses, the coffee boiling over the fire, the venison and buffalo steaks and freshly-caught trout broiling and the biscuits ready for the baking tin—everything prepared for the banquet.

The feast that followed was a splendid success. There was an abundance of coffee and biscuits for all, while the savory meats—venison, buffalo steaks and tongue, trout—all fresh from nature's larder, would have graced the table of the most fastidious Epicurean that ever lived. Then every mouthful was seasoned with a good appetite, such as only men who live as the trappers lived can have, and flavored with wit and story and laughter and songs. And, when at last the time came to say good night and to seek the comfort of their blankets, all rose and drank to the health of Rex and Dill and to the success of their mission to California in steaming cups of fragrant coffee; and then those who were not going to California shook hands and said farewell to

those who were going. When all had gone, and Rex and Dill had rolled themselves up in their blankets in the tent, they were about the two tiredest as well as the two happiest boys in all America.

"Isn't this a great life?" Dill exclaimed, as he snuggled down under the blanket. "So full of life and action. Think of what has happened just to-day—the fight with the big bully, the duel between him and Kit Carson—My, but isn't Kit Carson just splendid!—our banquet in the wilderness; and now, to-morrow morning at sunrise we are to start off again for California, through a thousand miles or more of trackless wilderness, swarming with hostile Indians and all kinds of wild animals! I don't believe I could ever be contented to settle down to city life again."

"Neither could I," Rex agreed. "I am going to be a hunter and trapper and Indian fighter, like Kit Carson. I tell you there aren't many men in the world who would have had the courage to have faced that big bully, Shunan, armed with a rifle, the way Kit Carson did with only a single-barreled pistol in his hand. It was great, and shows just the kind of stuff Kit Carson is made out of. But he doesn't seem to think that it was much of anything, only a disagreeable duty that for the good of all had to be done. Why, I even heard him say that he was sorry that he had to wound Shunan so badly; and the man was trying to kill him!"

"You bet, Kit Carson is all right! Oh, say, but

I am tired; and I reckon we'd better go to sleep, for to-morrow morning we start for California. Good night," and Dill rolled over and closed his eyes; and in less than five minutes both weary boys were sound asleep.

The next morning the packs were all on the backs of the horses, the good-bys all said, and our friends, nineteen strong, were riding out of the Valley of the Rendezvous, with Kit Carson, Captain Tom and Steeltrap Smith at the head, just as the first rays of the morning's sun glanced from the tops of the eastern mountains down into the Valley of the Green River.

Their route lay down the beautiful Valley of the Green River for something like a hundred miles, then swung westward around the southern spur of the Salt River Range into the Bear River Valley, and thence westward to the waters of the Great Salt Lake and on across deserts and plains and valleys and mountains to the Valley of the Sacramento in California and the Spanish Roman Catholic Mission of San Rafael, where the papers Rex and Dill had come so far to secure were supposed to be in the keeping of one of the brothers of the Mission—a thousand miles or more of trackless wilderness!

Now, remember, boys, that, at that time, there was not a single white inhabitant in all this vast stretch of country except the wandering trappers and traders, that the way was roadless and the rivers bridgeless, and that the Indians all along the route

would be ever on the watch to rob and murder—remember all this, boys, and even then you, at this day, can but faintly comprehend the real hardships and perils of such a journey as Rex and Dill have just started out to make.

The trail down the Green River was without adventures; but, on the fourth day after leaving the rendezvous, when our friends were passing through the mountainous country lying between the valleys of the Green and the Bear Rivers, Rex had an experience that will remain in his memory as long as life dwells in his body.

About the middle of that afternoon, as our little cavalcade of trappers was winding its way down the steep side of a mountain into a little wooded valley, an unusually large buck elk sprang out of a clump of bushes a hundred rods or so ahead and dashed down into the valley, where it disappeared in one of the small groves of trees that dotted the surface of the valley like islands. In an instant the hunting fever ran hotly through the veins of Rex and Dill.

"Come on!" cried Rex excitedly to Dill. "Let's see if Kit Carson won't let us hunt him. I want that head of horns," and, followed by Dill, he hurried on ahead to where Kit Carson and Captain Tom and Steeltrap Smith had paused to watch with the longing eyes of hunters the rapid flight of the elk.

Kit Carson smiled sympathetically at the excitement of the two boys, as they preferred their request, then his face sobered and he sat for a couple

of minutes studying carefully with his keen eyes the little grove of trees where the elk had vanished and the surrounding valley.

"I shouldn't wonder if you might get him by riding up to that grove of trees from both ends," he said, turning to the boys. "Tom and I were just thinking of trying it; but," and he smiled, "I reckon you boys will get more fun out of the hunt than we would; and, since the country all around is open, with no lurking places for hiding Indians near, I think it will be safe to let you boys go after the buck. What do you say, Tom?" and Carson turned to Captain Tom.

"I say, give the lads the fun," Captain Tom responded heartily. "The meat from that buck'll taste mighty good for supper to-night."

"An' that was 'bout th' finest head of horns I ever saw," supplemented Steeltrap Smith. "I was tempted tew have a try for th' old feller myself."

"All right, boys, you can have the hunt," and Kit Carson again turned to Rex and Dill. "But don't, under any circumstances, allow the excitement of the chase to take you out of sight of the trail. We are going to cross the valley near where that big rock sticks its nose up out of the ground," and he pointed to the other side of the valley, where a huge rock thrust itself outward like the nose on a man's face, "and we will camp in a little valley the other side of the ridge. Now, if anything happens to delay you, just follow our trail. You had better make a wide

circuit and come up to the grove from both ends, and one of you will be almost sure to get a good shot at the buck when he jumps the grove. You can go now. Good luck to you."

The eager boys needed no second bidding and at once started off toward the grove of trees into which the elk had disappeared.

The grove was not large, only a few acres in extent, and lay a little over a mile to the south of the trail. There were no other trees within half a mile of it, and the open prairie lay all around it, so that, indeed, it seemed as if the buck would have a difficult problem to solve if he escaped the rifles of both the boys unless he fled long before they came within range of the woods and that was an act hardly in the nature of a deer to do.

"I'll take that end," Rex said, pointing to the south end of the grove, when they reached the point where they thought it wise to separate. "It's the farthest off and White Cloud will take me there quicker than your horse will take you. Now try to get to your end about the same time that I do to mine, so that, no matter which one of us jumps the buck, he'll run out near enough to give one of us a shot. Good luck to you," and Rex galloped off on White Cloud to the south while Dill hurried away to the north.

Both boys made a wide circuit, so as to approach the grove directly from the north and from the south; and it so happened that Dill reached his end

a little before Rex did his, with the consequence that the elk came bounding out of the south end of the grove and ran straight toward Rex until within about fifteen rods of him, when, catching sight of the boy on the horse, he wheeled and leaped off to the right at a speed that only a frightened deer can equal.

Rex waited until the buck turned and then he fired. The animal gave a convulsive bound, showing that he was hit, and dashed on faster than ever.

"He's hit! He's hit!" shouted Rex in great excitement. "After him, White Cloud! After him!" and, striking White Cloud with the small whip he carried fastened to his wrist, the excited boy rushed after the fleeing deer at the full speed of White Cloud's swift limbs.

At first the elk gained on White Cloud, fleet as he was, then, to Rex's delight, he saw that the animal was running a little slower—that he was no longer gaining on White Cloud—that White Cloud was gaining on him!

"Hurrah!" he yelled. "He's hard hit! We'll get him yet! We'll get him yet, White Cloud! Faster! Faster!" and with voice and whip he urged on his noble horse to do his utmost.

For a mile—for two miles—for three miles the excited boy raced on after the deer, forgetful of everything, except the laboring buck that now was plunging along only a few yards ahead. Down a steep decline into a wooded gully plunged the deer

and the horse. Through the brush and the trees crashed the buck, and after him crashed White Cloud. Now the nose of White Cloud was almost over the rump of the buck; and then—

"Hurrah! He's down! We've got him!" yelled Rex, as, with a last convulsive bound, the deer plunged to the ground and lay still.

"Whoop-a! Whoop-a! I've got him, Dill!" and Rex leaped off the back of White Cloud the moment he could bring him to a halt, and ran to where the deer lay and bent over him, knife in hand, to cut his throat; and then—a dozen dusky forms seemed to leap up out of the ground all around him—a flash of dazzling light—a crash like the clap of a thousand thunders—and Rex knew no more.

When he came to, he lay, his hands and feet tightly bound together across the back of a galloping horse, in front of a huge almost naked Indian; and all around him he could hear and see the galloping horses of other mounted Indians.

"Oh! if I had only remembered and obeyed the command of Kit Carson, I would not be here," mourned Rex. "But it is too late now," and he cast a shuddering glance upward into the brutal face of his captor. "I hope Dill has escaped," and he looked around as best he could to see if Dill was in the hands of his captors; but, to his great relief, he could see no signs that his cousin had been made a prisoner by the Indians.

The Blackfeet, for at his first glance Rex had seen

with a shudder that his captors belonged to this dreaded tribe of Indians, rode as swiftly as they could make their horses go and as silently as shadows, without a pause for rest to man or beast, until the darkness of night compelled them to slow down; but they did not stop even then. For a couple of hours longer they continued on, through rocky defiles, down into steep canyons, and finally, at the end of that time, emerged into a secluded little mountain valley walled in on all sides by precipitous and lofty mountains, where, with a great halloing and shouting, they halted in a little woods by the side of a small stream of water; and Rex was dropped to the ground from the back of the horse, as roughly as if he were a senseless bag of wheat instead of a live boy.

For a few minutes Rex, too exhausted from the hardships of his long ride lying across the bony back of the horse to move or even to notice clearly what was going on around him, was allowed to lie undisturbed where he had fallen, then a couple of Indians came, and, picking him up, one by the feet and the other by the hands, carried him near to where a camp-fire was burning and dropped him on the ground under a large tree. The two Indians now unloosened the thongs of deerskin from his hands and feet which were badly swollen and very painful, and sitting him up against the trunk of the tree, bound him to the tree with strong cords of deerskin wound around his body and tied behind the tree.

Rex could now look about, and his heart failed him when he saw that he was in the midst of a large encampment of Indians. The little woods appeared to be full of tepees; and there were many squaws and papooses moving here and there, while a hundred or more warriors were gathered in groups around the brightly burning camp-fires. Evidently he had been taken to one of the mountain strongholds of the Blackfeet, where it would be impossible for even the skill and bravery of Kit Carson, backed by his small band of trappers, to rescue him.

The warriors appeared to be greatly stirred up over something. They were talking and gesticulating in a very excited manner for Indians; and presently they all gathered around a large camp-fire near where Rex was sitting, and, squatting down in circles, began smoking and talking. Every now and then a stately warrior would stand up and deliver an impassioned speech; and Rex knew by the frequent gestures in his direction that he was the principal subject of the deliberations of the Indians, and his blood ran cold when he noted that the orators were gradually working themselves and their hearers up into a frenzy of excitement and rage and that the gestures in his direction were becoming every moment more frequent and more threatening.

Back of the circles of warriors gathered the squaws and papooses, the firelight glittering in their black wicked eyes and shining on their bronzed faces and greasy black hair. These, too, were becoming

intensely excited; and frequently a dozen or more squaws, lead by some old hag, would make a rush toward Rex, shrieking and brandishing clubs and clawing the air with their long finger nails; and were prevented from wreaking their rage upon the unfortunate boy only by the lusty arms of three burly warriors who pushed and knocked them back with little ceremony.

Rex was a brave boy, and knew how to control his emotions; but the scene around him was so terribly portentous of the horrors to come, that, even his brave heart faltered and trembled, and he had to grit his jaws together to keep from screaming, at the thought of the harrowing tortures that he felt sure would be his, when the Indian warriors around the camp-fire had worked themselves up into the proper frenzy of rage. Strange that at this dreadful moment the thought of how his father had suffered a like fate should come to him and bring him comfort and courage, but it did. He recalled all that he had heard of his father's horrible fate—how he and the dozen of other trappers with him had been suddenly surrounded by hundreds of armed Blackfeet and captured, how all of them had been put to the torture, how one of them had finally escaped and had been found in a dying condition by a party of trappers, and how he had lived only long enough to tell of the horrors through which he had passed and of the heroic fortitude of his comrades when put to the torture by their

savage captors. The thought of how unflinchingly his father had endured the very tortures that now threatened him, put new courage into his heart. He would not disgrace such a father. He would show these savages that the same heroic blood flowed through his veins.

But now the time to put his fortitude to the test had come. The council around the camp-fire suddenly broke up with howls of savage exultation. The squaws and papooses, circling around the prisoner, became more furious and more threatening, but still the guards kept them back. A frenzy of savage excitement seemed suddenly to take possession of the whole encampment.

Rex knew that his fate had been decided, that he was doomed to the torture, that the supreme moment had come; and every nerve and cord and tendon in his body steeled and steadied itself for the dread ordeal. He no longer trembled, he had every nerve and muscle under control; and, when a huge chief, followed by six warriors, forced his way through the screaming threatening squaws and papooses to his side, and, cutting the thongs that bound him to the tree with one blow of his tomahawk, motioned him to arise, Rex arose and faced him with dauntless mien and unafraid eyes.

"Ugh, heap brave white papoose!" and something like admiration shone in the somber eyes of the chief. "Indian love brave men. No kill like squaw. Kill like brave warrior. Come," and the

chief, motioning Rex to follow, turned his broad back on him and stalked back through the shrieking crowd that surged around them.

The limbs of Rex were now free. In the belt of the chief within easy reach was the chief's knife. A sudden leap, and the knife would be in his hand. A swift blow, and the chief would lie dead—and he would fall dead on his body, under the avenging knives of the six warriors—a swift and merciful death, a thousand times better than the slow death by torture.

Every muscle in Rex's body stiffened, every cord tightened, his eyes were on the knife, he was about to spring; and then, as distinctly as if spoken in his ear, he seemed to hear the parting words of Captain Young: "Now, you boys just make the best of whatever luck comes, and remember that real pluck and grit will 'most always win out, even in the most desperate situations." His was, indeed, a "most desperate situation," but it was not absolutely hopeless. Something yet might happen. He would give "pluck and grit" a chance to "win out;" and, lifting his eyes resolutely from the knife, he followed the chief.

Guarded by the six warriors, Rex was now conducted to where the dead, bare trunk of a huge tree stood in the bright light of the camp-fires. The chief gave a guttural command, and his back was thrust against the tree, his arms pulled backward and his hands tightly bound behind the trunk.

A large circle was now formed around the prisoner, its inner ranks composed of the warriors and back of them stood the squaws and papooses. The light from the camp-fires brightly illuminated the wild scene.

Rex knew what was coming. He had often heard similar scenes described with shuddering horror by the trappers around their camp-fires; but now he was to be the victim himself. He knew how the Indians would gloat over any signs of fear or pain; and grimly determined that he would show them that a white boy could die as bravely, as stoically as ever an Indian did; and he threw back his head defiantly and proudly and looked out straight before him from fearless eyes.

The big chief now made a short speech, which was received with a wild burst of yells. The moment he ceased speaking, a warrior jumped out from the surrounding circle, and, shouting his war-whoop and flourishing his tomahawk, danced madly in front of Rex for a minute, and then, suddenly, with a mad yell, threw his tomahawk seemingly straight at the head of Rex. The keen blade flashed brightly in the firelight for an instant and the next it was buried in the wood of the tree not a quarter of an inch from the startled boy's head.

The skill of the warrior and the slight involuntary jerk Rex had given his head, was received with great applause and merriment; and the show went merrily on. Warrior after warrior exhibited his

skill, with the tomahawk, with the knife, with the bow and arrow, until the tree around Rex's body bristled with tomahawks, knives and arrows. Many times the weapons had grazed his skin and drew the blood, but not once had he received a serious wound, and, even in his extremity of peril, Rex could but admire the skill of his tormentors; and they, in turn, admired the fortitude and stoicism of the white boy; for, after that first jerk of his head, Rex had stood as motionless as a statue and faced the deadly weapons with steadfast eyes.

But this had been only the prelude; now the real tragedy was to begin. At a word from the big chief, the warriors who had thrown or shot the weapons rushed to the tree to withdraw them, while a score of squaws pushed their way through the encircling warriors and, with a hideous clatter of tongues, threw down in a circle around Rex the bundles of dry wood they carried, and which were to form his funeral pyre; and an old hag, chanting a death-song, began slowly approaching the pile, a flaming torch held high above her head.

At the sight of the flaming torch, the last hope left Rex and his lips began to move in prayer to the God of all; and then, suddenly, the warrior, who had thrown the first tomahawk with such skill, uttered a startled exclamation, just as he was about to draw his weapon from the tree, and bent eagerly forward. His eyes had caught the glitter of the firelight on the silver bracelet that encircled the

wrist of Rex. For an instant he examined the bracelet closely, for a moment he looked intently into the face of Rex; and then, turning quickly, he dashed the flaming torch from the old hag's hand, just as she bent to thrust it into the dry wood, knocking her sprawling on the ground, and shouted something to the astounded Indians.

In an instant pandemonium broke loose. A hundred warriors leaped to their feet, their weapons in their hands, their eyes glowing with baffled rage, and started toward Rex and his defender, while the old hag set up an unearthly howling, like a wolf driven from food, and slunk swiftly away. But, before the angry warriors could reach the tree where the astounded boy stood wondering what was happening, the big chief, with a tremendous bound, sprang directly in front of Rex, and facing his raging warriors, threw up both his hands in a commanding gesture for silence.

Instantly the furious warriors stopped, some of them not six feet from Rex and the encircling wood, the howls and yells ceased and an ominous silence followed, while every eye sought an explanation for these strange acts in the face of the chief.

For a full minute the big chief stood silent, motionless, until the last sound of the tumult had died away and the whisperings of the wind in the branches of the trees above their heads could be heard. Then he raised his right hand.

"Brothers," he said, "we are warriors, not wolves.

We are men, not children. We will listen to the words of Thunder-In-The-Face," and he turned to the Indian who had caused all this turmoil and who had stood, straight and motionless, by the side of Rex. "Speak. Why should Thunder-In-The-Face defend the white brave who has helped to send so many of our warriors to the happy hunting-grounds? Their spirits cry to us for vengeance. Why was his hand stretched forth to turn aside that vengeance? Speak, Thunder-In-The-Face."

"The white brave is the brother of White Otter. See, he wears the medicine bracelet of White Otter on his wrist!" and, with a swift blow of his knife, Thunder-In-The-Face cut the thongs that bound the hands of Rex behind the tree, and, catching hold of his right arm, held it out where all could see the bracelet shining in the bright fire-light. "The brother of White Otter is my brother," he continued, after a moment's pause to allow the exclamations of his astonished hearers to quiet down. "Can an Indian see his brother perish at the stake, and not lift his arm?"

The big chief, at the name of White Otter, started slightly, and, turning quickly, bent and examined closely the silver bracelet that you will remember White Otter had placed on the wrist of Rex.

"The words of Thunder-In-The-Face are true," he said, straightening up and again facing the circle of warriors. "The bracelet is the medicine

bracelet of White Otter. I, the father of White Otter, know," and the tone in which he spoke the name told that the big chief was very proud of his son. "But," continued the chief, "I know not how the medicine bracelet came on the wrist of the white brave. He is not my son. How, then, can he be the brother of White Otter? Speak, Thunder-In-the-Face, how know you that he is the brother of White Otter? How know you that White Otter put the bracelet on the white brave's wrist?"

"I have looked into the face of the white brave," answered Thunder-In-The-Face, "and it is the face of the brother of White Otter. I saw the hand of White Otter place the bracelet on the arm of the white brave, as a token of their brotherhood. I heard the words of White Otter when he told how the white brave had saved him from the horns of the mad bull. I saw the dead body of the mad bull lying by the side of the dead body of the white brave's horse. Where is White Cloud, the pride of White Otter, the glory of his tribe? Was he not the gift of White Otter to his white brother? Would White Otter give White Cloud to any but a brother? Have the horse of the white brave brought hither. The eyes of the Great Bull will know the horse of his son."

Many were the exclamations that had burst from the lips of the surrounding warriors during these words of Thunder-In-The-Face, and the faces of some had softened, but the fires of rage still blazed

furiously in the eyes of the majority, and the squaws still wailed and howled back of the warriors.

"Let the horse of the white brave be brought," commanded Great Bull, the moment Thunder-In-The-Face ceased speaking.

A few minutes later a couple of young Indians appeared leading White Cloud between them. The noble horse nickered and stretched out his nose toward Rex, the moment he was brought to a stop in front of the big chief.

"The horse is White Cloud," declared Great Bull, as he stroked the curved neck of the beautiful animal. "And White Cloud was the horse of White Otter, my son. The words of Thunder-In-The-Face are true. The white brave is the white brother of White Otter; for he wears the medicine bracelet and rides the horse White Otter gave to his white brother." The big chief paused, drew himself up to his full height, and, stretching out his right arm palm outward, said, with quiet deliberation: "The brother of White Otter is my son. He shall go free. I have spoken. He shall go free," he repeated, as he saw the angry glare that flashed into the eyes of many of the surrounding warriors. "I, the father of the son whose life he saved from the horns of the mad bull, demand his freedom. If there be any who would dispute the justice of this demand, let him draw his knife and stand forth. The Great Spirit will be our judge," and, laying his hand on the haft of the knife in his

belt, his eyes searched the circle of glowering faces around him.

Not a warrior accepted the challenge, although there were many guttural growls of discontent, which quickly died away under the stern and steadfast eyes of the chief.

"It is well. Bring hither the weapons of my white son and the saddle and bridle of his horse."

They were quickly brought and laid at the feet of Rex.

"The brother of White Otter will rest in the tent of his father, until the light of the morning makes plain the trails of the mountains. Then Great Bull will show him the way to his friends. Come," and he motioned Rex to pick up his saddle and bridle and weapons and follow him.

Of course Rex had not understood a word of all this talk; and you can imagine the condition of mind he was in while these stormy scenes were raging around him, how his hopes rose and fell, and something of the joy that thrilled through him, when at last, the chief motioned him to pick up his own rifle and to follow him; for now he knew that for the present at least he was safe, that the Indians would never have restored his weapons to him had they intended to kill him. Then, too he had made a shrewd guess from the actions of Thunder-In-The-Face and the big chief and the parts White Cloud and the bracelet had played, that White Otter was in some way connected with his deliverance; but

he could not understand just how it all had been brought about until he was in the tent of Great Bull and had listened to the chief's explanations in his broken English.

The next morning, as soon as it was light, Great Bull, accompanied by a half dozen picked warriors, rode with Rex, mounted on his beloved White Cloud, out of that secluded little mountain valley that had come so near to being his grave. At the end of an hour's riding one of the Indians who had been doing scout duty ahead, returned and reported that a small party of white men were cautiously making their way in their direction.

"Your friends there," the big chief said, turning to Rex, after listening to this report, and pointing in the direction where the scout had informed him the white men were. "You go to them. Great Bull happy to save life of white brave who save life of White Otter, his son. Good-by. How—how," and the big chief gave Rex his hand, then, wheeling his horse about, galloped off, followed by his braves.

Half an hour later Rex was relating his adventures to an intensely interested group of listeners—Kit Carson and Captain Tom and twelve of the trappers, who were on the trail of his captors. The others had been left to guard the camp.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" was the characteristic comment of Hammer Jones, when Rex had ended

his narration. "That's tew Ingines that otter have been borned white."

"I know Great Bull," Kit Carson said quietly. "He is the most powerful chief in all the Blackfoot tribe. I doubt if any other Indian could have taken you right out of the clutches of the red devils, without a fight. But," and his firm lips came together tightly, "where is Dill?"

"He—he—I—I—Didn't he get to camp?" cried the horrified boy, his face whitening and his whole body trembling. "Then the Indians must have got him, too!"

CHAPTER XX

THE AMBUSCADE

FOR a minute after that dread conjecture of Rex, with which the last chapter closed, no one spoke, and there was not a face in the company that did not whiten. All knew what capture by the Blackfeet Indians meant. Then Kit Carson turned to Rex in his quick decisive way.

"You neither saw nor heard anything of Dill or of any other white captive in the encampment where you were?" he asked.

"No."

"Then he was not there—and yet there, to their stronghold, is where they would take him, if he were alive," he added under his breath.

For a minute or two Kit Carson stood silent, deep in thought, then his face cleared and he turned decisively to Captain Tom and Steeltrap Smith.

"My belief is," he said, "that the party of Indians who captured Dill did not have time to reach their valley stronghold last night before it became too dark for them to travel safely. If I am right, they will try to get there this morning; and we must try to cut them off before they can do so. That is my judgment."

"My judgment, too," Captain Tom declared.

"Then, let's git after th' red devils," Steeltrap Smith exclaimed impatiently. " 'Tain't no time for discussin'. I reckon we're all willin' tew trust tew your jedgement, Kit. Only git us in sight of them Inguns that's got th' boy as quick as th' Lord'll let you. 'Tain't pleasant tew think of Dill in th' hands of them devils." The old trapper's face was white with anxiety and his eyes seemed on fire in their sockets. He knew what Blackfoot torture meant!

"Can you take us to a point where the Indians must pass to reach this mountain stronghold?" and Kit Carson turned swiftly to Rex.

"Yes. They must pass through a narrow valley about a couple of miles from here. At least that is the way we came out."

"Then lead us there at once. Every man see that his rifle is ready for instant use. Fall in single file. Move as silently as possible. Remember your ears and eyes are now guarding your lives. Forward!" and Kit Carson took his station by the side of Rex and signified that he was ready to start.

Rex now had an opportunity to see the famous Kit Carson in action. He rode erect, sitting in his saddle as if he were a part of the horse, his left hand grasping the reins, his right holding his rifle across the pommel of his saddle in such a way that it could be instantly thrown to his shoulder, and his

wonderful eyes, keen, searching, flashing their swift glances to the front and to the sides—every sense acutely alert to every sound and movement that might mean danger. As they rode on no one spoke; no one made an unnecessary sound. Even the horses seemed to feel the danger and the need of silence, and moved almost without a sound. At any moment the dread war-whoop of the Blackfeet might ring in their ears, at any moment their arrows and bullets might come whistling after their lives; for they were now riding through a country where ambuscading would be easy, and they had no time to guard themselves against it. They must take their chances.

Suddenly, just as they were entering the narrow valley Rex had spoken of, Kit Carson brought his horse to a halt and held up his hand for silence. His keen ears had heard a suspicious sound. Instantly every man and horse was transformed into equestrian statues.

Rex strained his eyes and ears, but he could hear nothing, see nothing.

"They are coming!" whispered Kit Carson. "Quick! In the brush on both sides of the valley. We must ambuscade them. Captain Tom take six of the men to the other side of the valley. The rest will remain here with me. My rifle will fire the signal shot."

Captain Tom, with six of the trappers, instantly hurried, but so silently that Rex could not hear a

sound, to the other side of the valley, where trees and rocks afforded ample concealment for horses and men. Kit Carson, as swiftly and as silently, hid his men and horses behind rocks and trees on his side of the valley. In three minutes after the command was given, not a man nor horse was to be seen, and the valley looked as quiet and as peaceful as an Arcadian dale.

The open and level part of the valley was not over ten rods wide, with a steep ridge of rocks covered with trees lying along each side. An ideal place for an ambuscade; and Kit Carson had been quick to make the most of all its advantages.

Rex found himself behind a mass of rocks, with Steeltrap Smith for a comrade. As yet he had heard no sound nor seen a sign of the advancing Indians. But now, coming faintly from far down the valley, he could hear the sound of horses' hoof beats and the voices of men. The eyes of Steeltrap Smith glistened as he listened.

"I reckon they're so near home that they feel safe, or they'd be more keerful," he said. "An' nobody's but Kit's eyes could have followed 'em here. Now, jest be keerful tew keep out of sight, when th' shootin' begins," and his eyes dwelt on Rex with an anxiety curious in its intensity. "We don't want to be sendin' back no death notices tew your dad."

"I have no father," Rex answered, his face saddening. "He—he was killed by the Blackfeet

about ten years ago. At least he was captured by them, and we have never heard a word of him since; and—and you know what that means."

For a minute or more Steeltrap sat looking steadily into the eyes of Rex, an expression on his face that almost frightened the boy, then he swiftly brushed one of his hands across his clouded forehead.

"I—I sometimes think I must have had a boy," he said, as his eyes darkened. "I—I—" He struggled as if vainly trying to grip some memory, moved his eyes from the face of Rex, glanced down the valley—and gripped his rifle.

"Thar, thar they come!" he cried, his face clearing and the hard lights coming back into his eyes.

Yes, there they came! Twenty-five Indian warriors on their war-ponies, riding slowly up the valley, looking watchfully to the right and to the left, but making no effort to keep their voices quiet. Evidently they felt confident that they were safe beyond pursuit.

Rex's eyes searched their ranks eagerly for Dill; and presently they saw him. He was riding, apparently unhurt and unbound, by the side of a tall young Indian chief.

"There he is!" whispered the excited boy to Steeltrap Smith. "There he is by the side of that young Indian; and I don't believe that he is hurt a bit. Oh, I wish I could yell!"

"Keep quiet!" and Steeltrap Smith turned a

stern face to him. "If you don't want tew see that youngster killed afore your eyes, keep quiet. Our only chance tew save him is tew take them Inguns by surprise. It they git th' chance they'll kill him afore they'll let us git him. Now, don't you dare tew move so much as an eye-winker, 'til Kit gives th' signel. Then give it tew 'em hot."

On came the Indians, riding slowly near the center of the open space in the valley, utterly unconscious of their deadly peril, their plumes and blankets fluttering in the breeze and their lance heads and ornaments glittering in the bright sunlight. Now they were almost between the two parties of ambuscading trappers, and so near that Rex could see the features of Dill distinctly. He was very pale and a streak of red down one side of his face showed that he had been hurt. Now they were directly between the two bodies of hidden trappers.

Rex's finger was on the trigger of his rifle, his eye glancing along its barrel, ready for the signal. His heart was thumping madly. Oh, would the signal never come?——

BANG!

Then, BANG—BANG—BANG—the twelve rifles spoke almost with one voice.

"At them, boys!" yelled Kit Carson, leaping down the ridge.

Rex jumped up from behind the rock, and raced down the ridge, yelling insanely. All the trappers

were yelling like fiends. His one desire was to get to Dill as quickly as possible. Steeltrap Smith ran close by his side. Almost before Rex knew it, his arms were around Dill; and he was watching with breathless interest a tremendous struggle between Hammer Jones and the young Indian chief. Both had dropped their knives; and now, with arms locked around each other's bodies, each was striving to throw the other and to regain his knife. The muscles of the young Indian seemed made of steel springs, so strong, so sudden were his movements. For a minute it seemed as if even the giant frame and great strength of Hammer Jones would not be able to overcome them. Then Ham got the hold he wanted; and, suddenly, the Indian went down, flat on his back, with Ham on top of him, his strong hands gripping the arms of the Indian in such a way as to render him helpless.

"Hand me my knife somebody," panted Ham, "an' I'll soon make this devil lay still."

The knife lay at the feet of Rex, and, stooping quickly, he seized it and hurried to the side of Ham.

The Indian now lay quiet. He had ceased to struggle. He was composing himself for the death-blow. His eyes were fixed in defiant scorn on the face of his antagonist.

Rex handed the knife to Ham, glanced at the face of the young chief—and suddenly threw his arms around the upraised arm of Hammer Jones.

"It's White Otter!" he yelled. "Do not kill him! You shall not kill him!"

Ham shook his arm free, thrust his knife into his belt and rose to his feet.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" and he stared blankly from the face of the young Indian to the face of Rex.

Rex instantly sprang to the side of White Otter, and, catching hold of one of his arms, helped him to his feet, and stood defiantly by his side.

The young Indian chief stood motionless by the side of Rex, his eyes glancing calmly around the circle of trappers that now surrounded them. He appeared the least excited, the least interested, of all the actors in this dramatic scene.

All the other Indians, who had not been killed by the volley of the trappers, had fled at the first sight of the trappers rushing down upon them from both sides of the valley. The horse of White Otter had fallen, with a bullet through his head, and, as the young chief jumped to his feet, Hammer Jones had leaped upon him, and the struggle already described had taken place. He now stood by the side of Rex, alone, surrounded by his white enemies.

"White Otter is my brother. He gave me White Cloud. His father, Great Bull, has just saved me from death by torture, because his son, White Otter, is my brother. White Otter must not be harmed. He must be allowed to go free," and Rex

glanced appealingly around the circle of faces.

"Them is my sentiments, tew," and Hammer Jones stepped to the other side of White Otter. "Shake. You're th' whitest Ingine an' th' toughest skinful of bones an' muscles, white or red, for your heft, I ever tackled," and Ham grabbed the hand of the young chief and shook it heartily.

"Yes, White Otter shall go free," and, with a smile on his pleasant face, Kit Carson approached the young Indian. "Carry to the Great Bull, your father, our thanks," he continued, addressing the chief, "for saving your white brother from the hands of the torturers and giving him his freedom. Tell him the white trappers know how to return good for good, evil for evil, bullets for bullets. Tell him that his son, the White Otter, is worthy of the great chief, his father. Now go. You are free. The white trappers must not linger so near the stronghold of the Blackfeet."

The young chief turned, and, taking the hand of Rex, placed it on his naked bosom over his heart.

"Twice has my white brother saved the life of White Otter," he said, in his soft pleasant voice. "As long as the heart under your hand beats will White Otter remember his white brother. The hatchet is buried forever between us. We are brothers, not enemies. Farewell," and, turning from Rex, the young chief glanced calmly around the circle of his enemies; and then walked slowly away, not once turning his head nor hastening a

single footstep, and thus passed out of view over a small ridge a dozen rods up the valley.

"Now," and Kit Carson turned to the trappers "we must get out of here just as fast as our horses legs will take us, or we will have the whole tribe of Blackfeet whooping down upon us. Everybody mount," and he sprang upon the back of his horse and led the way back to the trail to California.

That night, when all were safely back in camp, Kit Carson summoned the two boys; and told them that henceforth they must understand that he never gave one of his men a command that he did not think necessary, and that he never gave a command that he did not expect to be obeyed to the letter. He then showed them that, if Rex had obeyed him and not followed the elk beyond sight of the trail, and, if Dill had obeyed him and not followed Rex out of sight of the trail, neither of them would have been captured by the Blackfeet, and that all of this delay and trouble and bloodshed—six Indians had been killed—would have been avoided.

Rex and Dill had nothing to say in their defense, and returned to their tent with a new lesson on the necessity of strict obedience in their hearts.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEVIL'S MOUTH

THE next morning the journey to California was resumed.

Two days later our friends entered the fertile and picturesque Valley of the Bear River, a stream some two hundred feet wide, fringed with willows and hawthorns, which flowed into the Great Salt Lake, that wonderful inland sea, over whose salty waters the superstitions of the trappers and the Indians had thrown a veil of romantic and mysterious interest.

They were now in a region of many natural wonders, of fearsome dread to the superstitious Indians, who believed it to be the abode of the Great Spirit, and who shunned its more awesome places with religious dread. They had passed out of the country frequented by the terrible Blackfeet; and, consequently, they had little to fear from the Indians, but the caution of Kit Carson did not allow them to relax their vigilance in the least.

Rex and Dill had heard much about a number of strange mineral springs that the trappers called the Beer Springs from Steeltrap Smith and the other trappers, who had been through this section of the country before; and, when, late one afternoon, the

little cavalcade, rode down into a basin-like valley lying close to the north bank of the Bear River and went into camp in a grove of cedar only a few rods from one of the largest of these springs, the boys could hardly wait to properly care for and picket their horses before starting out to investigate the wonders of the place.

"Am dat dar spring jes' a-bubblin' beer right up out ob de ground, like it was wattah?" Pom inquired wonderingly of the two boys, as accompanied by the negro boy, they hurried to the side of the spring for their first drink of its waters.

"Sure," Rex replied smiling, "and you can drink all you can hold without its costing you a cent."

"Den dis niggah done gwine to come mighty nigh busticatin' his ab-dom-a-men," and Pom began unloosening his trouser's belt and otherwise preparing for the drink of his life.

They soon reached the side of the spring, and found its waters effervescing and bubbling like a huge caldron of veritable beer.

"Golly! Dat sho'ly am beer!" and the mouth of Pom made a dive for the effervescing waters.

In another moment Pom's thick lips were sucking up the water like a steam pump; but, suddenly the sucking stopped, and, straightening up with a jerk, he spit out about a quart of water and rose to his feet, a look of extreme disgust on his fat face.

"Dat ain't no mo' beer dan sourkrout am plum-puddin'," he declared, " 'less it am de debbel's beer,"

he amended. "I done smelled de brimstone," and nothing could prevail upon him to take another drink of its waters, nor of the waters of any of the other effervescing springs.

Rex and Dill both drank of the bubbling waters, and found them to have a slightly acid pungent taste, not altogether disagreeable; but both of the boys agreed that nobody would ever get drunk on beer, if all of the beer in the world came from these springs.

There were a large number of similar springs in the basin, and the surface of the river for a couple of hundred yards was in constant agitation from the escaping gases.

About a mile to the west of the Beer Springs and only a few feet from the river, Rex and Dill found another spring that awakened their curiosity and wonder even more than did the Beer Springs. Here, through an opening in a large red rock, a white column of water and foam was being constantly thrown upward to a height of some three feet, accompanied by subterranean noises, not unlike the sounds of a steamboat in motion. From this sound and motion some fanciful trapper had given the spring the name of Steamboat Spring. They found the water hot and of a disagreeable bitter taste.

Suddenly, while they were examining this spring, Pom, who had sat down on a near-by rock, uttered a yell of terror and bounded up into the air, as if a

charge of dynamite had been exploded under him. The moment he lit on his feet, he leaped off, casting frightened glances behind him, and did not stop until he had put a dozen rods between him and the rock where he had been sitting.

Rex and Dill jumped at the sound of the negro's wild yell, and whirled about; but, seeing nothing to cause his fright, stared after him in amazement.

"Come erway frum dar quick!" yelled the terrified negro. "De debble am in dat rock fo' sho'. He done blowed me off dat rock wid one hot breff frum his hot lungs—Golly, dar he blow ag'in!" and with bulging eyes the horrified negro boy stared at the rock on which he had been so recently sitting.

Rex and Dill turned quickly, and saw a light wreath of smoke shoot up from the rock accompanied by a sharp hissing noise, like the escape of steam from an exhaust-pipe. For a moment both boys stared in astonishment at the smoke; and then burst into hearty laughter, as the cause of Pom's fright dawned upon them. He had seated himself directly over a small hole, about an inch in diameter, in the rock, through which, at regular intervals, a hot blast of air and smoke was shot, with a sharp hissing sound. Naturally the fat body of Pom had closed this vent tightly and delayed the blast, until the subterranean forces could gather sufficient power for the hot blast to blow him off the opening, with the result that Pom felt sure that he had been hit by a breath of hot air fresh from the devil's hot mouth,

and no persuadings of Rex and Dill could get him to come a step nearer to "de debble's mouff," as he called the rock.

Rex and Dill would gladly have lingered longer in this land of wonders, for, in whatever direction they looked they saw something to awaken their curiosity and interest; but Kit Carson was too anxious to get to California to delay a moment for the purpose of studying the beauties and wonders of nature, and early the next morning the cavalcade of trappers was again on its way toward the setting sun.

For many days they now journeyed westward, sometimes through barren stretches of country, where there was neither food nor water for man or beast and where Rex and Dill first learnt the tortures of hunger and thirst, sometimes through delightful valleys, where game was abundant, grass and water plentiful and the eyes were greeted by a constant succession of beautiful scenes, and sometimes the trail took them along the precipitous sides of lofty mountains, down into walled canyons, through mighty mountain gateways, where every prospect was sublime with a wild grandeur and beauty no pen could describe and no brush could picture. They saw many Indians belonging to many tribes; but all were friendly to the whites and they had no serious trouble with them.

Thus traveling, day after day, never stopping, except to camp at night and to rest and eat at noon,

they pressed ever westward—the wonderful knowledge, instinct, intuition—call it what you will—of Kit Carson and Steeltrap Smith almost never being at fault—and finally crossed the last ridge of mountains, and, one warm sunny August afternoon, entered the beautiful Sacramento Valley and camped that night within a day's ride of their journey's end, the Mission of San Rafael.

Rex and Dill, during this long ride westward, had become close friends with Steeltrap Smith. The old trapper, whenever his duties permitted was always by the side of one of the boys. Their youth and the enthusiasm that always goes with youth, seemed to strike some long-hidden chord in the lonely man's nature, and set it to vibrating with hopes and feelings that had long been slumbering. Sometimes he would ride for hours by the side of Rex, hardly uttering a word, his eyes constantly turning to the face of the boy, with a questioning wondering look in them that always made Rex uneasy. Once Rex plucked up courage to ask him why he looked at him so strangely, and the old trapper's brows had clouded.

"I don't know jest why," he replied, "but thar's somethin' in your face, like a half-remembered dream, that makes me want tew look at you. You don't mind?" he added wistfully; and all the remainder of that day he looked so gloomy and sad that neither boy had the heart to question him again.

Both lads had learned from Kit Carson all that he

knew about the papers in the possession of the brother in the Mission of San Rafael, and which they had come so far to secure. It was little. He had never seen the papers, and had only heard Dill's Uncle Manuel speak of them as possibly containing some information that might be of value to Noel Conroyal, but what that information was he did not have the slightest idea.

And now that the two boys were at last so near to the mission, after so many weary weeks of journeying and waiting, their anxiety to see the brother and fathom the mystery that had sent them half-way across a continent, through the perils of an unknown wilderness, became almost unbearable; and that last night in the Valley of the Sacramento, before they reached San Rafael, seemed to the boys the longest night they had ever passed, so eager were they for the last day of their long journey to dawn.

The next morning Rex and Dill were the first ones up in camp.

"Rout out! Turn out! Everybody get up!" they shouted, as they ran from man to man, dumping them out of their blankets. "We're almost there. Hurrah for the Mission of San Rafael!"

By sunrise the cavalcade was again in motion.

Rex and Dill now rode at the head of the company, along with Kit Carson and Steeltrap Smith. At the top of every rise of ground they strained their eyes westward, hoping to catch a glimpse of

the towers of the Mission of San Rafael; but it was not until the middle of the afternoon that Kit Carson turned to the two boys and, with a smile, said: "I think you can see the mission buildings from the top of that hill," and he pointed to a small hill that rose from the level of the valley a half a mile ahead of them.

With a glad shout, both boys were off, as fast as they could make their horses go, White Cloud seeming almost to fly, as he leaped over the ground, bringing Rex to the summit of the hill a dozen or more rods ahead of Dill.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" and the excited boy jerked off his hat and swung it around his head. "We're there at last! Yonder are the mission buildings!" he shouted, turning to Dill, who now came up on a gallop and pulled his horse to a stop by the side of White Cloud.

Below them stretched a broad valley, and in the midst of it, glowing redly in the warm light of the western sun, were the fort-like buildings of the old Spanish Mission of San Rafael, surrounded by cultivated fields, while the neighboring prairies were covered with the herds and flocks of the mission.

"My, but those buildings do look good!" and the face of Rex glowed with interest—Remember it had now been over a year since the boys had seen the dwelling-place of a civilized human being—"I wonder how it will seem to sleep once more under

a real roof, surrounded by four solid walls, and eat off a real table, with a white table cloth on it? I have almost forgotten how such things look," and he laughed.

"So have I," and Dill joined in the laugh. "But I really haven't missed them. I didn't suppose before that a fellow could get along with so little and still be as comfortable as we have been. I wonder if those papers are still there," and his face sobered, as his eyes rested on the distant mission buildings. "It would be too bad, if, after all our trouble, we should find them gone."

"Oh, stop your grumping! Of course we will find the papers there. We didn't come all this distance for nothing. I wonder what can be in those papers," and the smooth forehead of Rex wrinkled. "I don't see why Uncle Noel should have made such a mystery about them. Let's have another look at that letter your father gave you. Maybe we were to open it, as soon as we got to the mission."

"No, I think not, not until we had first secured and read the papers; but, we'll see," and Dill thrust his hand under his coat and into a buckskin pocket strongly sewed to the bosom of his shirt, and drew out a sealed letter, carefully wrapped in oilskin, and, unwrapping it, read the superscription. "I was right. See," and he handed the letter to Rex.

The superscription read:

To DILL CONROYAL and REX HOLT.

(Not to be opened and read, until after they have secured and read the papers at the Mission of San Rafael.)

"Yes, you are right," and Rex handed the letter back to Dill. "We have got to wait until we get those papers before we know anything more about this mystery; and I am glad we do not have to wait much longer. I am getting very anxious to know what it is all about. Maybe the papers tell of the hiding-place of some treasure that your Uncle Manuel had hidden away," and his eyes sparkled. "Wouldn't that be great, if they did, and we should find the treasure?"

"You bet!" Dill agreed. "And I wouldn't be surprised, if that was just it. Come, let's ride on toward the mission. The others have almost caught up with us; and it doesn't seem as if I could wait until we get inside those walls and have a look at those papers."

Rex agreeing, the two boys started off on a trot toward the distant mission buildings.

Two hours later, the ragged, patched, travel-worn, weather-beaten, but strong and hardy band of trappers rode through the mission gates and halted in front of the mission buildings—their long journey ended.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY OF THE PAPERS

THE sun had set when our friends entered the gates of the Mission of San Rafael; but, so anxious were Rex and Dill to solve the mystery of the papers, that, the moment they had their horses properly cared for, both hurried to Kit Carson and Captain Tom.

"We want to find the brother who has the papers," Dill said, "and we don't know his name. Father, somehow, missed telling us. How shall we find him?"

"But, you are not going to hunt him up to-night? Can't you wait until morning?" Kit Carson queried, smiling at the excited faces of the two boys.

"What? Wait until morning, now that we are here, when it has taken us over a year to get here?" and Dill looked at Carson in astonishment. "No; we want to solve the mystery to-night. We couldn't sleep a wink, if we didn't."

"Well, I confess to being some curious myself about the contents of those mysterious papers," laughed Carson; "and I don't want to wait until morning either; so, I reckon, we'd better try to find the brother to-night and have it over. Let me see,

your father gave me the name of the brother in his letter. It was Juan. Yes, that is the name, Brother Juan. Come on, and we will try to find Brother Juan," and Kit Carson lead the way toward the large door of the mission building, near which a number of the brothers were grouped around a tall man, evidently the ecclesiastical head of the mission.

Kit Carson was warmly welcomed by the brothers. A few years previous he had done this mission a great service, by punishing some of their rebellious Indians, after the mission had attempted to do so and had been defeated; and the brothers had neither forgotten him nor his service.

As soon as the greetings and introductions were over, Carson, who spoke Spanish fluently, told how the boys had come from far-off New Orleans to find one of the brothers, who was in this mission a few years ago, and who was known by the name of Brother Juan, and in whose care a man by the name of Manuel Vargas had left some papers, which he was to keep until Manuel Vargas, or someone having authority from him, should come for them; and then he went on to explain that Manuel Vargas was now dead, but that before dying he had told his sister's husband, Noel Conroyal, about the papers and had given him authority to get them; and that the two boys, one of whom was a son of Noel Conroyal and the other his nephew, had been sent after the papers.

The moment Kit Carson finished speaking a tall

venerable looking priest, with an inquiring glance toward his superior, who nodded assent, stepped up to Carson.

"I am Brother Juan," he said, speaking in English, "and I remember Manuel Vargas very well. But he left no papers with me—Wait—Let me think. My memory is not as good as it once was. There was something about some papers. Now I remember. Manuel Vargas was very much interested in some papers that I have, something about a sick man that I once cared for; but he did not leave them in my care. They were already mine. He only wished me to guard them carefully, because he believed they contained some information that would be of great value to a relative of his, doubtless the Noel Conroyal you spoke of. Possibly those are the papers you have come so far to see. If so, I still have them; and will willingly allow you to examine them," and his eyes glanced from Carson to the faces of the two boys.

"Yes, those must be the papers we have come to get, since there are no others," Dill answered eagerly. "And can we see them now, to-night? You see, we don't know what the papers are about, but we know that it must be something very important, or father would never have sent us half-way across a continent to get them; and—and we just can't wait until morning to find out. Please get them at once for us," and Dill's face was full of appeal.

"The dear enthusiasm of youth!" and Brother

Juan smiled sweetly down into Dill's excited face. "Yes, you shall see the papers to-night, at once. Come with me. They are in my cell," and he again looked inquiringly to his superior, who again nodded assent. Then he led the way, followed by the two boys and Kit Carson and Captain Tom, into the mission building and to his cell, which was one of many opening into a long corridor running the full length of the building.

"Be seated, please," and Brother Juan pointed to a stone bench, projecting along the side of one of the walls of the cell. "We priests, far away from civilization, have not many of the luxuries of life," and he glanced around his bare cell with a smile. "Not that we care for ourselves; only, when friends come, we would make them more comfortable. Now will I get those very important papers," and, going to the opposite side of the room from the bench, he opened a small door that fitted tightly into the wall, exposing a cupboard, where he kept his most cherished belongings. For a minute or two he searched the little shelves of the cupboard; and then he turned to the two boys, a small packet of papers, tied with a buckskin thong, in his hand.

"I the circumstances remember clearly now," he said, as he studied the superscription written on the outside of the packet; "and, in order that you may know how these papers came to be written, I will relate them to you." He paused for a moment, his eyes bent thoughtfully on the packet. Evidently he

was recalling the long-passed scenes connected with the papers in his hand.

Rex and Dill could hardly sit still on the bench, so great was their excitement, now that those mysterious papers, which had been so long a burden of curiosity and anxiety on their minds, were actually within reach of their hands.

"I—I hope it is the hidden treasure," whispered Dill, his eyes on the precious packet.

"Or a gold-mine," declared Rex. "Listen!" and the eyes of both lads were fixed intently on the face of the brother, who now turned his eyes again to the little group on the bench.

"Eleven years ago," began Brother Juan, "a company of American trappers brought to the mission a white man, whom they had rescued from the Indians after he had been most horribly tortured. The poor man knew nothing. He was insane with pain and the fever. I some skill have in medicine and he was given into my care. The trappers did not know whc the man was. He was in—delirious, you call it, and could not tell so much even as his own name. I feared he might die; and then might come relatives inquiring; and who could tell them who he was? The man talked much, all wild talk; but there were names sometimes spoken, and I thought, if I wrote down the names and such of his words as seemed to tell something of his past life, that the record might help sometime to make it known who he was. This is the record I made,"

and Brother Juan tapped the papers in his hand with the finger of his other hand.

"And—and did the man die?" Rex asked, his eyes glowing with excitement and his face drawn and white.

"No," Brother Juan replied. "The man lived; but, unfortunately, when he became well, he had forgotten all of his past life, he did not know even his own name, nor the name of a friend or a relative. Poor fellow!"

"Where—where is he?" Rex was now standing on his feet and his whole body was trembling.

"I do not know," and Brother Juan's face saddened. "One morning he went out on a hunt. That was ten years ago, and we have never seen him nor heard a word of him since."

"Oh, if he was my father!" and Rex sank back on the bench. "If he was my father!"

"The papers! Let us see the papers," and Kit Carson, his own face tense with excitement, rose quickly to his feet and stretched out his hand for the papers.

"They are in Spanish, but not long," and Brother Juan began untying the buckskin thong. "Perhaps I had better read them to you in English," and he opened the papers.

"Yes," and Kit Carson, with his eyes on the face of Rex, sat down. "But don't keep the boy long in suspense. He is almost wild now."

"The names the man spoke," and Brother Juan

read from the opened paper, "were Margaret—"

"The name of my mother! The name of my mother!" and Rex again jumped to his feet.

"This name," continued the brother, "he spoke often, the most often of all. Next in frequency was the name Rex—"

"My own name! My own name! He was my father! He was my father!" Rex now stood directly in front of the brother, staring down on the paper.

"This name," Brother Juan's hands now were trembling, "appeared to be the name of a little child, a baby boy. Another name he often spoke was Noel—"

"My father's name!" and Dill grabbed Rex by the hand. "He was your father, Rex! He was your father; and he is alive!" he cried in the greatest excitement.

"You mean," and Brother Juan laid a hand on the agitated boy's head, "that he was alive ten years ago and that you hope the kind God permits him still to live. There were other names—"

"Did he—" broke in Rex excitedly. "You nursed him—you cared for him—you must know—Did he have a rifle and a beaver and a beaver trap all tattooed in a red circle on his upper right arm? Father was marked that way. I have often heard mother describe the tattooing."

For a minute Brother Juan examined the paper,

and when he raised his eyes to the face of Rex there were tears in them.

"Yes," he said. "You have given an exact description of the tattooing on the upper right arm of the unknown man."

"Then," and Rex caught hold of the hand of the priest and shook it as if he would jerk the arm from the shoulder, "he was my father! He was my father! There is no need of reading more now! He was my father! Thank you; I, his son, thank you for the care you gave him. Now," and he turned to Kit Carson and Captain Tom, "we must find my father. I will never go back to New Orleans until I have found my father, or I know that he is dead."

"Wait—we have not read father's letter! We can read it now. Perhaps it will tell us what to do," and Dill, excitedly thrusting his hand into the pocket sewed to his shirt bosom, pulled out the letter that he had carried so long and so far, and, with trembling fingers, tore open the envelope.

All now crowded close around the two excited boys; and Dill, after a moment's rapid glance down the written lines, read the letter aloud.

This is what he read:

My Dear Son and Nephew:

When you read this letter you will have learned the contents of the papers held by Brother Juan in

the Spanish Mission of San Rafael, California; and will know whether or not they give any real clue to my wife's long missing brother, the father of Rex, whom we supposed to have been killed by the Blackfeet ten years ago. If in your judgment and the judgment of Kit Carson, whom I trust as I would my own brother, they appear to identify this man as my wife's dear brother and Rex's father, then I bid you search the West until you find him, or learn positively of his death.

Kit Carson will aid you in the search. Give him your fullest confidence and obedience. I have given him authority to draw on Captain Young of Santa Fé for ample funds to meet all expenses.

I have kept the purpose of your mission to California from you, until now, because I did not wish to raise any false hopes in the bosom of Rex, unless there was a solid foundation for them to stand on.

Of course, if Rex should find his father, he must bring him home with him, where a welcome from wife and sister and relatives and friends is awaiting him that will warm every drop of blood in his body.

Now may God speed you on your mission and bring you all safe home.

Your loving father and uncle,
NOEL H. CONROYAL.

"There, we are to search until we find him, if we have to search through the whole West; that

is father's orders; and you are to help us," and Dill turned anxiously to Kit Carson.

"That I will do most willingly," Carson answered promptly. "But now I think we have had enough excitement for one night and had better return to our quarters."

"I will accompany the two boys," Brother Juan said; "for I know how the son's heart must long to hear more of his father. I will tell him more about that father."

Accordingly, when they returned to the quarters which had been assigned for their use by the brothers, Brother Juan was with them.

They found the trappers all gathered in a large room, talking and laughing like a lot of schoolboys out on a holiday frolic, all except Steeltrap Smith, who was sitting moodily in a corner by himself. The old trapper had come to have an almost fatherly affection for the two boys, and the thought that now that the journey was ended, they must soon separate, perhaps never to see one another again, and that he must live out his solitary life to the end, alone and uncheered by the voices or presence of dear ones, wrung the very chords of his heart. As the boys entered the room his face lighted, and he arose quickly and hurried toward them.

"Oh, Steeltrap, my father is alive! My father is alive!" cried Rex, the moment he caught sight of the trapper. "We have found papers here proving it. Brother Juan—"

He stopped short. Brother Juan had caught him spasmodically by the shoulder and was staring wildly into the face of Steeltrap Smith. The next moment Brother Juan had seized the sleeve of the trapper's right arm, and, with one vigorous jerk, had torn it open from wrist to shoulder, exposing the skin beneath; and there, on the bared upper arm, the startled eyes of Rex saw a rifle, a beaver and a beaver trap, all tattooed in a red circle.

"My boy! My boy!" exclaimed the priest, his eyes swimming. "This is the man I nursed back to health! This is your father!"

For a moment Rex stood staring from the tattooing on the bared arm to the face of Brother Juan; and then, suddenly comprehending what it all meant, with a look on his face and a yell that no one present will ever forget, he threw his arms around the neck of Steeltrap Smith, crying, "Father, my father!"

Steeltrap Smith stood for a minute, his mouth working, his eyes staring, but not uttering a word. Then he held Rex at arm's length from him, his eyes searching his face.

"You, you my son! My son!" he cried. "O God!" and, throwing both hands to his forehead, he fell to the floor, like one struck dead.

In an instant Brother Juan was bending over him, his hand searching for his heart. In a moment more he looked up, a glad light shining in his eyes.

"God is good. He lives," he exclaimed. "The

excitement has overcome him. Now take the boy away. I will send for him as soon as his father recovers sufficiently to see him again."

The strong arms of Hammer Jones almost carried Rex, who was now weeping violently, from the room and into the corridor outside; and there the boy refused to go a step farther until he had learned how it was with his father.

For two long hours, Rex waited outside the door, in an agony of suspense; and then the door opened and Brother Juan stepped out.

"My boy!" and the saintly old man threw his arm around Rex. "My boy, I have wondrous news for you!" and his face shone with happiness. "All is well with your father; and, in the wonderful providence of God, the shock has restored to him his lost memory. He wishes to see you. Come, I will take you to him," and, holding Rex by the hand, he lead the happy boy to where his father lay.

Possibly the readers of this book will be interested to know that their friends, Rex and Dill, were with Fremont, the Pathfinder, and Kit Carson, during those exciting days when California was wrested from Mexico, and played their parts bravely in the great drama that gave the Golden State to the Union; and that the author proposes to tell, in another book, the story of their adventures during this dramatic period.

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